

## BOOK REVIEWS

***The Vietnamese-American 1.5 Generation*. Ed. Sucheng Chan (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2006), 323 pp., \$24.95 paper.**

*The Vietnamese-American 1.5 Generation* is divided into two parts. Part I offers an overview of Vietnamese history, focusing on Vietnam under French colonial rule, the First Indochina War, American involvement in Vietnam, the Fall of Saigon and its aftermath, and refugee exoduses. Part II comprises narratives written by Vietnamese-American students enrolled at the University of California system.

In order to understand why almost two millions Vietnamese and Chinese-Vietnamese fled Vietnam after the Communists gained victory over the Saigon regime and U.S. troops on April 30, 1975, Sucheng Chan discusses the complexity of Vietnamese history. While the history of Vietnam and the Vietnam War can be found in several history books, the plight of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam and their life experience under the Vietnamese government, either before or after 1975, are often ignored. However, Chan addresses these issues in her book, giving a broader perspective about the conflict between the Chinese and the Vietnamese.

The focus of the book lies in Part II, in which Chan presents fifteen narratives written by Vietnamese-American and Chinese-Vietnamese-American students of the University of California. These anonymous narratives are diverse in genres: essay, diary, family history, memoir, biography, and autobiography. All of the selected narratives were written by students, however their voices do not represent broad voice of the Vietnamese-American community.

Chan names Part II of her book “Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings.” Common themes of this section include social and political turbulence of Vietnam right before April 30, 1975, corrupted bureaucracy, “boat-people” and refugee-camp experience, evacuation by sea or by air with American troops, Communist oppression and hostility, and post-war reeducation camps. Like the majority of other immigrants and refugees residing

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in the United States, the Vietnamese also encountered language barriers, cultural and traditional differences, contradictory family values, homesickness, nostalgia, American individualism, alienation, and racial discrimination. As the first Vietnamese-American generation, the writers of these narratives discuss how their parents and grandparents expected them to maintain and preserve Vietnamese culture at home but at the same time adjust themselves to American culture and lifestyle in public. The writers have to debate whether they should be Vietnamese, Chinese, American, Vietnamese-American, or even Chinese-Vietnamese-American. Vietnamese culture emphasizes filial piety and obedience; thus, these writers have to strive much harder to please their parents and bring honor to their families. In America, they have to prove that they are competent, ambitious, and successful so that they will be respected in America.

Conflict is another significant aspect throughout these narratives. Some writers express vehement disagreement toward Vietnamese heritage and prefer American individualism and consumerism. Also, those whose parents supported the Saigon regime and the United States during the war, on the one hand, hate the Vietnamese Communist government, but on the other hand, desire to return to Vietnam to help the country. It should be noted that Chan's book would not be allowed for the reading public in Vietnam because it reflects Communist barbarity and cruelty, and all the narratives condemn the Vietnamese government for its corruption, inhumanity, and discrimination. These essays would be considered "reactionary" and "anti-Communist" according to literary tenets established by the Vietnamese government. The price that these writers and their families had to pay for freedom America cannot be compensated for because of the immense loss and deprivation that define who they were and who they are now. Chan's book is important, despite its lack of other representative Vietnamese-American voices, because it is about true life stories and humanity.