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# Reports, Recollection, and Refugees:
# The Early Vietnamese American Experience through Periodicals and Oral Histories

THESIS

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by

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, who were Vietnamese refugees themselves. Nothing I have accomplished in my life thus far, including this, would be possible without their unconditional love and support.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Reports, Recollection, and Refugees:
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The formation of a unique identity, the obstacles to retaining culture in a new country, and the American government's role in these issues during and after the Vietnam War are topics that have been widely examined by scholars of Vietnamese American history. However, these works have often overlooked the early and essential concerns of the community upon their entrance into the United States, as well as taken the differences between the first and second waves of refugees for granted. This paper will seek to discuss the Vietnamese American experience in the 1970s and 1980s with a specific focus on a few concerns Vietnamese refugees had in these years. Specifically, I will be looking at Vietnamese American periodicals published in this time period in order to show these concerns through their coverage in printed material. I will also use several oral history interviews with Vietnamese refugees of the second wave to help corroborate their prevalence. I argue that Vietnamese Americans were primarily interested in three points, adaptation, immigration, and politics, during their initial settlement in the United States, and that these concerns were more apparent with the second wave of immigrants that arrived from 1978 to 1980 than their previous counterparts. In conclusion, this paper, by examining select periodicals published by the Vietnamese American community and oral histories, highlights the often undervalued aspects of early Vietnamese American history that were crucial to the diaspora's survival and assimilation into American society.

## Introduction

At about noon on April 30, 1975, North Vietnamese tanks crashed through the gates of the Independence Palace in Saigon, the home and workplace of the President of South Vietnam. Later that day, South Vietnam president Dương Văn Minh announced the complete dissolution of the Saigon government. The Fall of Saigon signified the end of the Vietnam War, a conflict that had lasted for almost two decades and inflicted an immense loss of human life on both sides. Now referred to as "Black April" (*Tháng Tư Đen*), the "Day We Lost the Country" (*Ngày mất nước*), or the "National Day of Resentment" (*Ngày Quốc hận*) by the anti-communist community in the Vietnamese diaspora, this event also initiated a mass exodus of South Vietnamese people who were considered "at risk" for having worked with the United States or South Vietnam governments during the war, as well as others who feared a recurrence of a massacre similar to the one during the North Vietnamese occupation of Huế.

The United States government had already taken measures to evacuate South Vietnamese and American government personnel and civilians before the Fall of Saigon. President Gerald Ford had signed for Operation Babylift on April 3, which resulted in the evacuation of over 2,000 orphans. Operation New Life, which began on April 23, evacuated 110,000 Vietnamese refugees, while Operation Frequent Wind – which most closely preceded the Fall of Saigon – transported 7,000 Vietnamese and Americans, including those working in the U.S. embassy, out of Saigon. The 200,000 people that emigrated in this period (1975-1978) comprised the first wave of Vietnamese refugees that arrived in the United States. Many were well-connected with the American government, educated, and relatively proficient in English.[1] In addition, they were generally wealthier, more likely to have directly experienced the war, and had greater exposure

[1]Nhi T. Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*. (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 3.

to American and French culture than subsequent waves. The prevalence of these types of individuals in this initial wave is attributed to a fear of persecution by the communist government. However, this generalization of the first wave excludes those who left during this period but were not part of the upper class.[2]

The second wave, which arrived from 1978 to 1980, saw a more substantial number of refugees flee Vietnam due to economic and political struggles.[3] This wave is most representative of the "boat people" (*Thuyền nhân*) that are usually associated with the mass exodus from Vietnam after the war. In contrast to their first wave counterparts, these refugees were lower socioeconomically – most were peasant farmers, fishermen, or small-town merchants. Additionally, a significant part of this wave consisted of ethnic Chinese who were fleeing strong anti-Chinese sentiment in Vietnam in the midst of border tensions with China and the nationalization of businesses by the Vietnamese government.[4] Indeed, the postwar experience in Vietnam for this second wave largely informed their anticommunist stance that would persist to their resettlement. Their escape was often characterized by traveling through "dense jungles on foot" and turbulent seas.[5] Those who survived the journey (commonly referred to as "*vượt biên*" or "crossing over") found themselves in asylum camps in the Philippines and Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. From these countries, many immigrated to states that accepted them as asylum seekers, including Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, and the Netherlands.[6] The differences

[2]Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, *This Is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 10.

[3]Pelaud, 10. Pelaud notes that there is no consensus on the dates for each wave.

[4]Pelaud, 11.

[5]Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 3.

[6]The post-Vietnam War refugee crisis was not the first occurrence of Vietnamese presence in the United States. After World War II, Vietnamese students, scholars, and war brides

between the two waves would be especially apparent in their respective settlement experiences in the United States, especially how easily they became acclimated to their new enviromnents.

In the United States, Vietnamese refugees mostly settled in metropolitan and suburban settings, eventually forming ethnically rich neighborhoods that were ready to receive additional immigrants.[7] The US government subjected them to dispersal policies, but several sites saw the formation of a concentrated Vietnamese population: Orange County, San Jose, Houston, Dallas, and Washington, D.C.[8] What did these areas look like prior to Vietnamese settlement? In the case of Little Saigon in Southern California, the district had consisted of "empty lots, orange groves, and strawberry and bean fields" in the 1950s and 1960s, before the formation of Little Saigon by Vietnamese refugees and immigrants.[9] It was primarily a white and working class community focused on small-scale manufacturing and farming.[10] Farms transformed into housing tracts and commercial shopping centers, gradually developing into the bustling Little Saigon that exists today.

Orange County, and more broadly Southern California, became a prominent destination for incoming immigrants due to various reasons. First, affordable housing and real estate were attractive to immigrants who were of lower socioeconomic status. Second, the area presented job

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came to the United States, as well as CIA and U.S. military recruits in help bolster the (anti-communist) containment policy. As United States became more involved in Vietnam, the number of these migrants increased; the number of Vietnamese students in the U.S. increased from 200 in the 1950s to about 3,000 in the 1960s.

[7]Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese,* ix.

[8]Pelaud, *This Is All I Choose to Tell,* 12.

[9]Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese,* 32. While Little Saigon and Southern California are seemingly limited in trying to describe Vietnamese America is a whole, Lieu describes it as "the global center for all Vietnamese people displaced around the world" as well as a "safe haven where exiles could fly the South Vietnamese flag, creating possibilities for imagining community"; I believe this proves their demonstrative ability.

[10]Karín Aguilar San-Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xv.

opportunities in technology and defense industries that had emerged during the Cold War. Third, Southern California's warm climate resembled that of Vietnam's. Lastly, Orange County's proximity to Camp Pendleton, where 50,000 Vietnamese refugees were processed and held waiting for sponsorship, provided the prospect of being reunited with family that would eventually arrive.[11] The social composition of the first wave of refugees – academics, military officers, those connected with the American government – expedited the development of Little Saigon. While many found jobs in computer, defense, and aerospace industries, others who did not have the necessary skill sets associated with those fields opened their own businesses. The ideas of entrepreneurship and the American Dream presented opportunities of upward mobility to Vietnamese Americans.[12]

From this, it seems that Vietnamese Americans had gradually reached a level of comfortability and successful adaptation – creating their own ethnic communities in which businesses prospered, such as Little Saigon – by the end of the 1980s. What endeavors and obstacles did the Vietnamese refugees have to endure to reach this point? For one, areas such as the future Little Saigon initially lacked the benefits that were inherent with an ethnic enclave. During the mid-1970s and early 1980s, for example, Southern California only had ethnic resources in Los Angeles' Chinatown, where Asian immigrants could find specialty goods such as "teas, spices, sauces, and noodles" that were unavailable in American grocery stores. Other than the limited availability of familiar ethnic locales, this posed problems for Vietnamese families in Orange County who did not have means of transportation.[13]

[11]Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 32-33.
[12]Lieu, 33.
[13]Lieu, 37.

Moreover, the American public was ambivalent about the arrival of new refugees. At the end of the war, polls showed that 36 percent of Americans favored Vietnamese immigration, while 54 percent opposed it.[14] It was difficult for many Americans to accept the prospect of new Vietnamese immigrants after the recession of the early 1970s, and some expressed hostility stemming from fear of competition over limited resources. Senator George McGovern of South Dakota believed that "90% of the Vietnamese would be better off going back to their own land."[15] Indeed, this xenophobic sentiment resulted in several cases of violence against Vietnamese Americans. In 1981, a dozen boats owned by Vietnamese Americans on the Texas Gulf Coast were burned by Ku Klux Klan members. Louis Beam, a veteran of the war and Grand Dragon of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan that was harassing Vietnamese American fisherman on the coast, openly stated his desire to kill Vietnamese, regardless of South or North allegiance during the war: "There are a number of Vietnam veterans like myself who might want to do some good old search and destroy right here in Texas. They don't have to ship me 12,000 miles to kill Communists. I can do it right here."[16] That same year in Little Saigon, a petition was started by non-Vietnamese residents demanding "a moratorium on the issuance of business licenses to any person of Vietnamese origin." This arose from a misconception that Vietnamese immigrants were receiving welfare and interest-free government loans, which was symptomatic of the restlessness of the conservative concentration of Orange County. Furthermore, Little Saigon signs were defaced by what the *Los Angeles Times* called "zealous patriots who viewed [the signs] as the gradual corrosion of America into pockets of ethnic communities."[17] In 1989, Patrick Purdy opened fire on the schoolyard of Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton,

[14]Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 14.
[15]Lieu, 10.
[16]Pelaud, *This Is All I Choose to Tell*, 14.
[17]Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 34-35.

California, killing five Vietnamese and Cambodian children and wounding twenty-nine others.[18] Thus, Vietnamese settlement in the United States was not without its struggles, and the community saw racial and economic backlash that lasted well into the 1980s. Given these obstacles, assimilation was a necessity. But what did assimilation entail, and what were other pressing issues for the Vietnamese refugees?

Within the scope of Asian American history, the Vietnamese American experience is relatively recent when compared to that of Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans. The aftermath of the Vietnam War situates the postwar presence of Vietnamese people in the United States only to the last forty to fifty years. Thus, scholarship on Vietnamese American history is typically limited to this time frame. However, it does not suffer from a restricted amount of academic perspectives, as the literature on Vietnamese Americans comprises theories and scholars from various disciplines, including American studies, Asian American studies, ethnic studies, international studies, sociology, and others.[19] While the field discusses a multitude of topics ranging from war memory to generational tensions, two themes are consistently emphasized: a striving to hold the United States accountable for its actions during the Vietnam War, as well as its relationship with Vietnamese refugees, and the process of identity formation undertaken by Vietnamese Americans. A combination of political analysis and cultural or social observations forms the basis of several of these works, though others often lean towards one or the other.

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[18]Pelaud, *This Is All I Choose to Tell*, 14.

[19]Nhi T. Lieu is a professor of American studies, Asian American studies, and women's and gender studies; Min Zhou is a professor of sociology and Asian American studies; Carl L. Bankston III is a professor of sociology; Long T. Bui is a professor of international studies; Yến Lê Espiritu is a professor of ethnic studies; Việt Thanh Nguyễn is a professor of English, comparative literature, and American studies and ethnicity; and Karín Aguilar-San Juan is a professor of American studies. Their respective training and academic background are even more diverse and most likely informs their treatment of these topics.

The first trend found in scholarship on Vietnamese Americans pertains to the American role in the Vietnam War and the resulting dispersion of refugees. The United States, in addition to having facilitated much of the conflict that characterized the Vietnam War, asserted itself as a benefactor to Vietnamese refugees by offering asylum after the war.[20] In addition, the United States government played a role in forming the circumstances of Vietnamese refugees upon their arrival through the enforcement of resettlement policies. Initially, resettlement efforts aimed to geographically disperse the influx of Vietnamese refugees in order to prevent a concentrated, new ethnic group. U.S. politicians implemented a policy of "Americanization" in which refugee camps would hold classes on English and American life and culture that would provide refugees with "basic survival skills such as shopping and budgeting", as well as how to interact with Americans.[21] The scholarship also reframes the American policies during the war, such as Nixon's Vietnamization in Long T. Bui's *Returns of War*.[22] Vietnamization left the burden of the outcome of the war on South Vietnam while simultaneously allowing for an escalated extent of conflict and bloodshed.[23] Another facet of this theme is the discussion of the Vietnam War as a demonstration of American imperialism, which contributed to the identities of Americans and Vietnamese Americans. Since the United States did not emerge from the Vietnam War as the

[20]Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 3. Vietnamese American identity serves to mask American complicity in the war: "the role of the United States in the world, whether as a military presence or as a major benefactor of the new economic world order" shows U.S. dominance as it "shaped Vietnamese patterns of migration, American memory, as well as immigrant identity formation."

[21]Min Zhou & Carl L. Bankston III, *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 29.

[22]Long T. Bui, *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory*, (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 5. Nixon's use of Vietnamization mainly referred to the extraction of the American troops and military presence from Vietnam, the transferring of military responsibility to South Vietnam, and part of the Nixon Doctrine that "proclaimed that all U.S. allies were expected to take care of their own military defense … and the leader of the free world would only support them from afar."

[23]Bui, 7.

victor or liberator of South Vietnam and its people, it constructed a substitute for this absence: "the freed and reformed Vietnamese refugees." Finally, war memory is also a focal point; scholars such as Việt Thanh Nguyễn and Yến Lê Espiritu note the United States' influence on the memory of the Vietnam War and therefore on both the war itself and its legacy.[24]

The theme of identity formation – more specifically, the forging of a unique social, cultural, and political identity distinct from other Asian American groups – is also prominent throughout the field. A significant aspect of this identity formation is cultural, such as the community's focus on visual media. This factor, as well as the memory of the Vietnam War in particular, is indicative of the unique position of the Vietnamese diaspora when compared to other Asian American communities.[25] In addition to cultural identity and war memory, the diaspora's identity as a refugee group is consistently discussed. Even before their arrival to the United States, Vietnamese refugees formed distinct communities in asylum camps. Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston contend in *Growing Up American* that U.S. efforts for dispersion and assimilation produced an opposite effect, as gathering numerous Vietnamese refugees "in an American context" helped foster a unique Vietnamese identity. These refugees became accustomed to camp life – through producing the first Vietnamese-language publications in the United States, for example – and bonded with other Vietnamese refugees despite socioeconomic

[24]Việt Thanh Nguyễn, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 9. Nguyễn does not solely describe the United States as patrons to Vietnamese refugees. He also contends that the "industries of memory" are part of the war machine; Hollywood, the U.S. military, and Vietnamese memorials and museums spread the American-centric propaganda that glorifies and perpetuates war, much like how Espiritu contends that the role of the "grateful beneficiary" of Vietnamese refugees enables American militarism.

[25]While the role of the United States government is central to its argument, *The American Dream in Vietnamese* discusses the formation of Vietnamese American cultural identity through various mediums such as business, variety shows and videos, and beauty pageants and how these figure into issues such as generational gaps, gender, and assimilation.

differences. The perception of the American public towards the influx of refugees also contributed to this type of identity, as their acceptance remained contested. Zhou and Bankston, as well as Nhi T. Lieu in *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, note the initial American perception of Vietnamese refugees as too "culturally different", "communist spies", and "new economic competitors."[26] Furthermore, the refugees' status as "stateless exiles" – the question of how being refugees from a country that no longer exists affects their sense of self and perspective on the war – also contributes to this identity. As such, the image of South Vietnamese refugees becomes one of victimhood from the perspective of the American public.[27]

Another crucial aspect of this literature that is common with the rest of studies on Asian American groups is the model minority myth – the idea that Asian Americans reach a higher level of socioeconomic success than average as manifested through education, occupation, income, criminality, and family stability. This suggestion is contentious as it dismisses the need for government assistance (such as affirmative action) and juxtaposes Asian Americans against other minority groups, such as African Americans and Hispanic Americans, while simultaneously perpetuating stereotypes about each demographic.[28] Lastly, the theme of identity formation is often linked with community-building and place-making. As a result, what it means to be Vietnamese American is a major question, with scholars such as Karín Aguilar-San Juan considering factors outside of the United States as contributions to the Vietnamese American identity.[29]

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[26]Zhou and Bankston, *Growing Up American*, 30.

[27]Bui, *Returns of War*, 11.

[28]Yến Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees*, (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2014), 6. In the late 1980s, mass media attributed the economic and educational success of first-wave Vietnamese refugees to the "larger Asian American process of assimilation".

[29]Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons*, 1.

Most existing works on the Vietnamese American experience can be distilled to two themes: the identity formation of the Vietnamese American diaspora (often culturally based) and the United States' role in the Vietnam War and its refugee aftermath. The scholarship tends to draw a direct correlation between these two trends of American imperialism and Vietnamese American identity. The United States felt a moral obligation to accept Vietnamese refugees served to erase its military action in Vietnam despite a public that mostly rejected the influx of immigrants and was conflicted over American involvement in the war. The U.S. government's wartime policy of Vietnamization reveals how the United States perpetuated a narrative in which it provided freedom for South Vietnamese refugees while simultaneously absolving itself of any wrongdoing or loss in the Vietnam War. Also, the American government reinforced a Vietnamese identity through its resettlement policies. In all, the scholarship shows an overwhelming trend in the literature on the Vietnamese American experience to focus on holding the United States accountable for its imperialist actions in Vietnam and identity formation (and sometimes retention), as well as how the former affected the latter. Consequently, the arrival of Vietnamese refugees to the United States puts their story in the shadow of what placed them there – the Vietnam War.

This paper will coincide with the current scholarship in examining Vietnamese Americans in tandem with American policies. The initial refugee experience was heavily shaped by these laws, and the relationship between the two is therefore indispensable. However, the paper will diverge from the field in that it will not scrutinize the profound trends acknowledged but will focus on more rudimentary aspects of the Vietnamese American journey. I argue that second-wave Vietnamese refugees were less concerned about identity formation and culture retention (that is, striving to keep Vietnamese traditions while living in a new country) than

current literature suggests and that they were instead more focused on three primary points of interest: adaptation, immigration, and politics. In other words, Vietnamese refugees did not prioritize the construction of a cultural, social, and political space that was unique from other Asian Americans and had fundamental preoccupations that were more pertinent to survival and a seamless incorporation into American life.

I also contend that not enough attention is paid to the differences between first-wave and second-wave refugees, with their socioeconomic backgrounds being primarily used for historical contextualization rather than nuances in their respective experiences. The preoccupation with survival and adaptation is more apparent with second-wave refugees. I will be using different periodicals published from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s in a few cities across the United States (Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and Houston) to demonstrate these concerns. The reason I chose periodicals from these locations is due to a factor mentioned previously: Vietnamese enclaves gradually formed in these cities as immigration took place. Therefore, I believe these periodicals are demonstrative of the general concerns of the Vietnamese American population during this period.

The concern with adaptation is exhibited through advice and coverage on learning English, employment, education, legal issues, social security, and health. In addition, the United States' policies on immigration, specifically with Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian refugees, are consistently discussed in the periodicals. Finally, the Vietnamese American community's interest in politics is manifested through observations of the communist government in Vietnam and the community's participation in local politics.[30] In turn, these

[30]I use the term "Vietnamese American" to refer to Americans of Vietnamese descent as defined by essayist Monique T.D. Truong, who is referenced in *The American Dream in Vietnamese*. This includes the group of Vietnamese refugees who emigrated to the United States

factors, specifically adaptation and immigration, signify the differences between the first wave of refugees that were predominantly more acquainted with American customs and the second wave that did not have that luxury. The first wave of Vietnamese refugees had been more exposed to American culture – language, customs, politics – while the second wave essentially arrived with a blank slate with regards to American life. I believe that the periodicals, published during the time frame of the second wave, were written with this later audience in mind and benefitted from the knowledge of the first iteration of refugees that had the prior exposure to America and by then had lived in the country for a few years.

This is not to say that attempts at retaining Vietnamese culture and identity were nonexistent. Instead, they were minimal and seemingly less prevalent when examining these periodicals. In fact, even as the Vietnamese American community grew and more leisurely topics were covered, these concerns, especially of Vietnamese politics and American refugee/immigrant policies, remained salient in print material.

While periodicals are revealing in their breadth of topics and the correlating readership, the direct account of the experience of Vietnamese Americans is invaluable. I will thus also be using oral interviews from several Vietnamese American refugees to supplement my argument. Some of the interviewees were able to recall their lives after the end of the war, their journeys to refugee camps and the United States, and their initial experience in the country in extreme detail. These oral histories, which are sourced from the Vietnamese enclave in Orange County, California, are representative of the Vietnamese American experience and often correlate with

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following the Fall of Saigon in 1975, immigrants that arrived before 1975, those that arrived in 1979 through the Orderly Departure Program, and their descendants. In most of the oral interviews I examined for this paper, the interviewees, who were born in Vietnam and came to the United States as refugees, mostly identified as Vietnamese American and defined this label as having cultural ties to both nations: for example, going to an American school and learning English while speaking Vietnamese and eating Vietnamese food at home.

the concerns indicated in the periodicals. That is, the examined subjects discuss common themes of adaptation and survival that would have made them the target audience of the periodicals.

## I. Adaptation

Adaptation, the process of learning a country's way of life and integrating one's self into its society, is undoubtedly a necessary endeavor for any immigrant entering a new country, and Vietnamese refugees were not an exception to this. However, their experience is unique from that of refugees from many other Asian countries due to a few factors. First, the United States' major involvement in the Vietnam War had created pre-existing links between Americans and Vietnamese people before the advent of their latter's exodus. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the first wave of refugees, many of whom had worked at the United States embassy in Saigon or were family members of those associated with the United States government. In other words, they were well-connected and at least familiar with the English language. Second, the Vietnamese refugees largely saw themselves as part of an exiled community that heavily opposed communism, which set them apart from the ethnic Chinese community in particular; the latter was not as invested in maintaining an anti-communist agenda.[31] A third point of its distinction from other Asian refugee groups was its eventual focus on the variety show genre (and popular culture as a whole) and the utilization of technology to disseminate this entertainment form.[32] Lieu argues that these Vietnamese cultural productions set forth a new "diasporic Vietnamese subjectivity, shedding an 'impoverished refugee' image for a new hybrid, bourgeois, ethnic identity."[33]

[31]Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 37.
[32]Lieu, xvi.
[33]Lieu, 81.

While identity undoubtedly became a pervasive issue among Vietnamese refugees with time, survival and adaptation loomed large upon their arrival. When asked about the challenges he faced in starting a new life in the United States, Jonathan Nguyễn, who arrived as a refugee in 1979 after living in a refugee camp for six months, described experiences with learning English, attending school, finding a job, and surviving daily.[34] Nguyễn was raised in a family that owned a business and did not struggle financially. However, his parents were not educated past high school, and he would experience this same obstacle following the end of the war. Thus, Nguyễn's family suited the archetype of the refugees from the second wave on the points of lower education and less exposure to American culture.[35] Another refugee, Đàn Thế Lê, who arrived in the same year in Connecticut after spending 9 months in a refugee camp in Japan, emphasized the importance of learning English even in Japan as he knew he would eventually head to the United States.[36] Lê described himself as having come from a "rather poor family"; his father obtained a high school diploma equivalent and his mother did not receive a formal education. Lê himself stopped attending school in sixth grade when the war ended – a similar experience to that of Nguyễn. He was not exposed to American culture until his move to Connecticut.[37] The situations of these two Vietnamese Americans reveal the specific need and urgency for adaptation, as a result of being less equipped culturally and economically, that was more characteristic of the second wave that began in 1978.

[34]Jonathan Nguyễn, interview by Janelle Aika Uchiumi, *Linda Vo Class Oral Histories, 2012*, Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project, Life Stories of Vietnamese Americans in Southern California, University of California, Irvine, April 26, 2012, 23.

[35]Jonathan Nguyễn interview, 5, 7.

[36] Đàn Thế Lê, interview by Trang Nguyen, *Linda Vo Class Oral Histories, 2012*, Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project, Life Stories of Vietnamese Americans in Southern California, University of California, Irvine, April 28, 2012, 10.

[37]Đàn Thế Lê interview, 1, 3, 14.

Two Vietnamese-language periodicals will be examined to establish this preoccupation with these practical facets of adaptation and survival: the *New Life Digest* (*Đời Sống Mới Sưu Tập*) and *Tiên Rồng, the Viet Newsletter*. The *New Life Digest* was published in Washington, D.C. during the late 1970s.[38] Its articles, written bilingually in Vietnamese and English, were aimed towards helping new Vietnamese residents of the United States in their process of acclimation to American society, with articles of advice sometimes being the front pages of the paper as opposed to a usual news article. The typeface used in the Vietnamese portions of this periodical is especially telling of the early stages of Vietnamese settlement, as the diacritic marks of the Vietnamese language appear to be manually written rather than automated. Periodicals from later years that will be later examined feature these marks much more properly. I believe the years of the

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Một Lối Học Anh ngữ
Learning English a Different Way

*Figure 1. Front page of the August 1978 issue of Đời Sống Mới Sưu Tập*

[38]It is possible that this periodical's publication could have extended into the 1980s. However, UC Irvine's Special Collections and Archives only contains issues from this time period. I was unable to find any additional issues from further research.

periodical's publication seem to situate it with a readership mainly comprised of second-wave refugees. Furthermore, I suspect that the publication's location in the capital indicates that it was published by first-wave refugees that had been previously connected to the U.S. government during the war. *Tiên Rồng*, published in Roanoke, Virginia, was much more attentive to local news in its material than the *New Life Digest* (which tended to discuss topics on a national scale) and was printed in a magazine format as opposed to the typical newspaper layout. Roanoke had become a major site of refugee settlement during this time.[39] Despite their differences, much of the content of both periodicals focuses on providing information specifically for newly settled Vietnamese Americans in their black and white pages. Thus, these fundamental issues of survival were especially paramount in the hierarchy of needs for Vietnamese refugees.

### i. Language

Learning English was crucial for incoming refugees due to obvious reasons – it was the key to functioning normally in American society: in work, school, casual conversation, et cetera. This was more evident with second-wave refugees who were not as acquainted with the language as their first-wave counterparts. Many of them had never spoken English in their lives. Loan Phạm Thái, who arrived in Bakersfield, California in 1980, described how she was uncomfortable about not being able to talk to her sponsor. This led her to read her children's books from school, watching television, looking through an English dictionary, asking others to give her feedback on her speech during conversations, and listening to English-Vietnamese translation tapes while sewing at home in order to improve her English to a proficient level.[40]

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[39]U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, *Bureau of Justice Assistance Bulletin: Building Relationships Between Police and the Vietnamese Community in Roanoke, Virginia*, by Garry Coventry and Kelly Johnson. NCJ 185778, Washington, D.C.: DOJ, 2001.

[40]Loan Phạm Thái interview by Christina Tran, *Linda Vo Class Oral Histories, 2012*, Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project, Life Stories of Vietnamese Americans in Southern California, University of California, Irvine, May 11, 2012, 29-30.

The importance of learning a new language for refugees is clear as some of the periodicals are written bilingually or even explicitly emphasize the importance of English. The front page of an August 1978 issue of the *New Life Digest* contains an article titled "Learning English a Different Way" (*Một Lối Học Anh ngữ*) prepared by staff members of the National Indochinese Clearinghouse (specifically the Center for Applied Linguistics), an organization that helped "refugees adjust as smoothly as possible to their new country and communities" through "the use of linguistics to address social and educational problems" and bilingual and ESL education.[41] It stresses the necessity of learning English:

> If you are like most refugees, you want to be able to speak English well. Knowing English can be a big help in getting settled in America. School children have to understand and speak English to continue their education. And even though you've finished school, you need English for many reasons - to take care of your family, to get to know your American neighbors, and to cope with the many problems of building your new life in America.[42]

This notion of "the many problems" of building a new life is indicative of a presumed difficulty in assimilation for Vietnamese refugees. Indeed, their status as "the first sizable non-European or European-culture refugees to come to the U.S. and … [to] come from a land with so low a level of development" contributed to this inherent struggle.[43] The second-wave refugees'

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[41]"Expanded History." *Cultural Orientation Resource (COR) Center*, www.culturalorientation.net/about/history/expanded-history.

[42]National Indochinese Clearinghouse, "Một Lối Học Anh ngữ (Learning English a Different Way)." *Đời Sống Mới Sưu Tập (New Life Digest)* (Washington, D.C.), vol. 2, August 1978, 1.

[43]Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 6. Lieu references a study by Barry Stein, which this quote is from. However, she critiques its dismissal of the "Americanization processes that took place in Vietnam" and its narrow conception of the refugees' cultural awareness, as well as its underestimation of the refugees' ability to adapt. Despite this, I believe that acknowledging the difficulty in adaptation is not equivalent to suggesting the refugee's inability to do so and that this assertion may be more applicable to different waves of refugees.

relatively minimal exposure to American culture exacerbates this problem by putting them at a disadvantage with regards to learning English. Thus, the obstacle of adaptation for Vietnamese refugees can be considered a question of Americanization. However, I contend that the process of Americanization in the context of learning English was more based on a need to function in an English-speaking country rather than constructing a distinct Vietnamese American identity. The article did not emphasize a need to form a unique ethnic identity; it merely stressed English's role in helping to build a "new life in America."

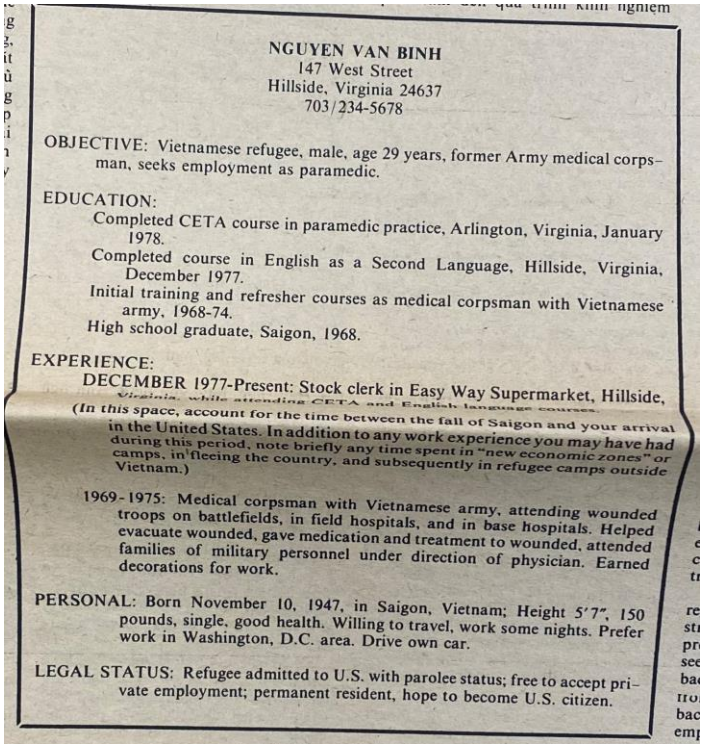
"Learning English a Different Way" also recommends several methods of learning English, focusing on rhythm, vocabulary, and sentence structure, as well as discusses methods that are less effective, such as the "grammar-translation" approach that prioritizes reading over speaking. The article stresses, "Remember, your goal is to *communicate* in English. You will be talking with Americans who don't know anything at all about you, or about your country, or about your language. You want to understand what they say, and you want them to understand you."[44] This emphasis on the separation between the Vietnamese refugees and American society at large signifies the major concern of adaptation Vietnamese refugees were experiencing at the time, beyond basic needs. Tensions between American citizens and Vietnamese refugees, as previously described by the former's opinion of the latter's arrival, make this insistence on learning English especially pertinent. This is made even clearer when one considers the racially motivated violence that targeted Vietnamese Americans in the years following the publishing of this article. The article's position on the front page also indicates its importance to the Vietnamese community and how refugees prioritized adapting to American society over other concerns related to cultural preservation and identity.  Furthermore, this preoccupation with

[44]"Một Lối Học Anh ngữ (Learning English a Different Way).", 1.

learning English would continue to manifest in future generations. For example, the Vietnamese American community in Versailles Village, New Orleans saw a development in 14.1 percent of first-generation children being fluently bilingual to 50.4 percent in second-generation children.[45] Thus, the emphasis on learning English saw long-term effects that lasted through the next generation of Vietnamese Americans, which makes its importance and necessity more evident.

### ii. Employment

Another facet of adaptation that is prominent across these periodicals is employment. In the same issue of the *New Life Digest* is a recurring section titled "Working in the United States" (*Làm Việc tại Hoa Kỳ*), which discusses résumés. The article describes their importance and function, as well as the criteria they must meet to be considered. It suggests several sections and what to include in them: identification, objective, summary, education, experience, personal, and legal status. The last part of this guideline, legal status, is acknowledged as "not usually included on resumes, but is important for Indochina refugees, so that employers will know they intend to remain in America and will not be leaving after a few months." This stress on legal status suggests a different side of the Vietnamese need to adapt: to not be treated as



NGUYEN VAN BINH
147 West Street
Hillside, Virginia 24637
703/234-5678

OBJECTIVE: Vietnamese refugee, male, age 29 years, former Army medical corpsman, seeks employment as paramedic.

EDUCATION:
Completed CETA course in paramedic practice, Arlington, Virginia, January 1978.
Completed course in English as a Second Language, Hillside, Virginia, December 1977.
Initial training and refresher courses as medical corpsman with Vietnamese army, 1968-74.
High school graduate, Saigon, 1968.

EXPERIENCE:
DECEMBER 1977-Present: Stock clerk in Easy Way Supermarket, Hillside, Virginia, while attending CETA and English language courses.
(In this space, account for the time between the fall of Saigon and your arrival in the United States. In addition to any work experience you may have had during this period, note briefly any time spent in "new economic zones" or camps, in fleeing the country, and subsequently in refugee camps outside Vietnam.)

1969-1975: Medical corpsman with Vietnamese army, attending wounded troops on battlefields, in field hospitals, and in base hospitals. Helped evacuate wounded, gave medication and treatment to wounded, attended families of military personnel under direction of physician. Earned decorations for work.

PERSONAL: Born November 10, 1947, in Saigon, Vietnam; Height 5'7", 150 pounds, single, good health. Willing to travel, work some nights. Prefer work in Washington, D.C. area. Drive own car.

LEGAL STATUS: Refugee admitted to U.S. with parolee status; free to accept private employment; permanent resident, hope to become U.S. citizen.

*Figure 2. Sample resume*

[45]Zhou and Bankston, *Growing Up American*, see Table 5.2.

merely temporary or unreliable workers. While scholars may analyze this as contributing to their identity as a "model minority", I am suggesting that the community's striving to appear as a legitimate labor force is simply because they needed jobs. Perhaps most striking about this article is the acknowledgement of the readership, who, again, is likely the second wave of refugees that began arriving during the publishing of this periodical: "Since U.S. employers are very concerned with the continuity of one's work experience, you may want to take the opportunity here to explain why you had few or no jobs during the period 1975-1977, so the potential employer does not assume you were unemployed without good cause."[46] This acknowledges the status of many refugees during the Vietnam War who may have been at sea or in a refugee camp (such as in the Philippines) and along with the discussion on legal status, is further demonstrative of the intended readership of the periodical.

When the periodicals do not provide advice on obtaining employment, they point to resources refugees can use. In the first issue of *Tiên Rồng,* a section titled "Finding a Job" (*Tìm Việc Làm*) advertises a seminar held by the "*Ủy Ban Nhân Lực Đông Dương của Cộng Đồng Công Giáo*" (Indochinese Human Resources Committee, a Catholic organization) to aid refugees in finding employment.[47] It states that the seminar will prioritize refugees who are currently receiving public cash assistance or supplementary cash assistance (*Những người tỵ nạn hiện đang lãnh trợ cấp xã hội bằng tiền mặt hay trợ cấp bổ túc*). This also suggests part of its intended readership: Vietnamese immigrants who may not have found employment yet and are receiving governmental aid. Therefore, the inclusion of these sections that pertain to employment

[46]"*Làm Việc tại Hoa Kỳ* (Working in the United States)", *Đời Sống Mới Sưu Tập (New Life Digest)* (Washington, D.C.), vol. 2, August 1978, 3.

[47]"Tìm Việc Làm", *Tiên Rồng, the Viet Newsletter* (Roanoke, VA), vol. 1, 1977, 6. I must note that this translation is only approximate and may not accurately name the mentioned organization; I could not find records of such an organization in further research.

display its prevalence as a concern for refugees during this period. Moreover, the periodicals draw attention to the distinction between the first and second waves. While the first wave was generally better educated and culturally acquainted with the U.S., which lowered some barriers to finding employment, the second wave was evidently less equipped to do so as having come from less educated backgrounds. The Vietnamese, just as any other immigrant group, wanted to survive with a basic standard of living in the United States. Being employed was a crucial part of this goal.

### iii. Education

Đàn Thế Lê, explaining his decision to attend college after high school, described the Vietnamese perspective on education: "That's the whole Vietnamese thinking that you [have] to have education... because in the East, the culture [is] that knowledge is power so you go to learn the knowledge not for the sake of learning knowledge but when you have knowledge, you hold some kind of power. You can become successful."[48] Indeed, this remark displays the role of education in Vietnamese culture and identity, but Lê also defines a crucial being "successful" as having money. This was surely an important prospect for Vietnamese refugees of lower socioeconomic backgrounds in order to survive in a new society.

Education is another focal point of the periodicals that reflected adaptation. The children of Vietnamese immigrants are an important topic of study in that they perhaps best demonstrate the intersection between a Vietnamese upbringing at home and an American education at school. Zhou and Bankston argue in their study of Vietnamese refugees' children that the communities Vietnamese Americans built were not simply insertions into already established networks (there were no existing ethnic resources they could rely on) but rather extensions of the already-existing

[48]Đàn Thế Lê interview, 16.

environment that they were forced to adapt to. However, while they mostly frame this idea in the context of how it shaped Vietnamese American children's identities, I wish to expand on this facet of adapting to an environment.

In the August 1976 issue of the *New Life Digest*, the front page includes a section titled "Back to School" (*Ngày Tựu Trường*).[49] The first sentence of the article shows its intended readership in that it addresses most refugee children who "will be beginning their second year of school in the United States this fall" – children who were part of the first wave. It follows a similar theme found in many of its articles of not necessarily focusing on current events but rather offering advice to aid in the adaptation of refugees. Parents of children going to school for the first time or changing schools are urged to "take them to school on the first day to meet with teachers and to be sure the children are properly enrolled."[50] The specific nature of this article is indicative of its intent to address the major concerns of the Vietnamese refugee population of the time. Education provides opportunities for upward mobility and a better standard of living. Parents within the second wave, generally the less educated peasant farmers, fishermen, or small-town merchants in Vietnam, surely wanted their children to obtain a level of education higher than their own. This was, and perhaps still is, of utmost importance. When asked about her first experiences living in the U.S., Loan Phạm Thái described registering her children in school even before searching for employment.[51]

To put the importance of education in the context of Vietnamese American communities, a 1993 survey asking Vietnamese American high school students in Versailles Village, New

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[49]Like the title of the previous article, this title is inaccurately translated – a more accurate translation would be "First Day of School". Although this is perhaps pedantic on my part, I believe it further highlights the later improvement of translation in future issues.

[50]"*Ngày Tựu Trường* (Back to School)", *Đời Sống Mới Sưu Tập (New Life Digest)* (Washington, D.C.), vol. 2, no. 8, August 1976, 1.

[51]Loan Phạm Thái interview, 22.

Orleans about their family values revealed that 70.8 percent of them strongly agreed that "to work hard or study hard" was important.[52] Furthermore, 72 percent of high school students in this area believed that going to college was very important, regardless of reading and writing skills in Vietnamese.[53] Thus, obtaining an education was an important value instilled by Vietnamese parents unto their children, and the presence of an article on the front page of the *New Life Digest* about returning to school only highlights this importance. Scholars often frame this as being subject to the "model minority" image and a factor in forming an ethnic identity by extension, but one must consider the fundamental importance of being educated in the United States to immigrants of this socioeconomic background. Education is strongly connected to the two aforementioned topics of adaptation: learning English and employment. Vietnamese refugee children could achieve both through education and obtain a higher standard of living as immigrants.

**iv. Laws**

A significant aspect of becoming acclimated to a new country is becoming familiar with its laws – different customs require refugees to reconstruct their inherent legal knowledge as it pertains to activities such as child discipline, shopping, marriage, and signing documents. The 1978 issue of the *New Life Digest* also contains an article titled "Common Legal Questions" (*Cố Vấn Pháp Luật*) that addresses these issues, which it acknowledges as "common legal matters for which refugees have been seeking help from the free legal service offered by the American Bar Association."[54] For example, the article discusses the definition of child abuse, its relevant laws, and protocol for the crime. It references the 1974 Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment act,

[52]Zhou and Bankston, *Growing Up American*, see Table 3.2.
[53]Zhou and Bankston, see Table 5.7.
[54]"*Cố Vấn Pháp Luật* (Common Legal Questions)", *Đời Sống Mới Sưu Tập (New Life Digest)* (Washington, D.C.), vol. 2., August 1978, 4.

which defines child abuse as "the physical or mental injury … negligent treatment, or maltreatment of a child under the age of 18 by a person who is responsible for that child's welfare circumstances which indicate that the child's health or welfare is harmed or threatened thereby." It makes clear that American law still gives some room for child discipline and punishment "without actually injuring the child."[55] The discussion of this topic is suggestive of the differences between what would have been considered acceptable discipline of a child in Vietnam as opposed to in the United States – a major concern for a refugee wanting to raise their children in a new country, to be sure. Annthy Thảo Nguyễn, who left Vietnam as a boat refugee in 1979 and settled in Orange County, described the difference in child-rearing between Vietnam and the United States through her own experience: "In Vietnam, I grew up in a very large family, and children must obey the parents. Any talking back would be met with corporal punishment. Over here, parents really defer to their kids."[56] In fact, there is a Vietnamese proverb that places importance on corporal punishment over leniency, literally translated to "love means whipping, hate means sweetness and gentleness" (*Thương cho roi cho vọt, ghét cho ngọt cho bùi*).

Zhou and Bankston examine this issue through the lens of cultural differences. While American society values parental authority, it is built on the fact that children are dependent on their parents – they are no longer children once they become independent. In Vietnamese culture, by contrast, children are morally obligated to their parents for their entire lives. Vietnamese parents take responsibility for their children's success and failures, justifying stern forms of discipline based on bringing "only honor to the family". U.S. laws that protect children from punishment that is considered physical or psychological abuse demonstrates different

[55]"*Cố Vấn Pháp Luật* (Common Legal Questions)", 4.

[56]Annthy Thảo Nguyễn interview by Thuy Vo Dang, *Thuy Vo Dang Oral Histories*, Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project, Life Stories of Vietnamese Americans in Southern California, University of California, Irvine, January 12, 2013, 18.

assumptions of the individuality of children and what constitutes physical harm. Thus, there exists a tension between Vietnamese parents' refusal to abandon traditional ways (exercising corporal punishment) and their children's difficulty in accepting traditional forms of discipline that is rooted in the expectation of being treated as individuals "who are owed respect and who have some measure of control over themselves."[57] While Zhou and Bankston frame this as a question of a clash of cultural identities, one point they make actually suggests the more urgent issue of adaptation: Vietnamese families use corporal punishment much less frequently in the U.S. than they did in Vietnam because "parents have increasingly become aware that American ways are not their own".[58] The periodicals aimed to make refugee parents more informed in American child-rearing in order to assimilate into American society. Perhaps the previous element of employment would no longer matter if Vietnamese parents were to face legal repercussions for exercising corporal punishment and therefore be unable to provide for their families. Furthermore, a child may be removed from the home if the punishment is deemed as abuse. Thus, being aware of these laws is not only critical for survival but also the integrity of the family, an important goal.

"Common Legal Questions" also addresses the crime of shoplifting, including its prevalence in the U.S. and the technicalities surrounding the crime. It explains that a customer putting "an item in his or her pocket rather than in the shopping basket" qualifies as "merchandise concealment" and is therefore considered shoplifting, even if he or she intends to pay for it at the cash register.[59] This section could be considered a warning as it advises refugees to always utilize a shopping cart or basket and put all items in it "to avoid misunderstanding." On

[57]Zhou and Bankston, *Growing Up American*, 168.
[58]Zhou and Bankston, 168.
[59]Zhou and Bankston, 4.

a more minimal note, another legal warning the article provides is on the topic of signing documents. It stresses that the refugee be "absolutely certain" about agreeing with "the matter and conditions stated above your signature" or acknowledging "receipt of items listed above it on a shopping bill," advising caution about not fully understanding documents before signing them.[60] Again, the understanding of these nuances in American law appear to be directly crucial in being able to navigate this new society.

A typical struggle a refugee experiences pertaining to marriages that happened in Vietnam or Indochina is that the spouse remains there or cannot be located, and the refugee intends to remarry. The article explains that the refugee is required to obtain a divorce from the previous spouse if they wish to marry again; to do so before a divorce is obtained is illegal.[61] By addressing important legal questions, this periodical exhibits its prioritization of helping newly-arrived refugees in adapting to American life. In addition, this need for familiarity with American laws can be attributed to factors beyond issues of adaptation to questions of Americanization and a divergence from their past in Vietnam: the need to be considered "worthy of asylum".[62] Any sign of being unable to assimilate into American customs may have hindered the group's progress as a community. While other literature might stress this assimilation as part of a process of identity negotiation, I am emphasizing it here as a performance in order to secure a practical end: being able to reside in the country without legal obstacles.

[60]Zhou and Bankston, *Growing Up American*, 4.

[61]Zhou and Bankston, 4.

[62]Lien, *The American Dream in Vietnamese,* 15. Lieu uses this idea in the context of inner class differences between Vietnamese refugees, which is referenced in more detail on the section titled "Immigration" in this paper.

### v. Social Security

Social Security was a pressing issue for refugees during their initial experiences in the United States. Tuấn Anh Nguyễn left Vietnam in 1981 after having spent three years in a reeducation camp as a result of his service as a military officer in South Vietnam. He traveled by boat to refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines before arriving in the United States. When asked about his feelings about becoming a citizen, Nguyễn stated that he believed citizenship was not as important as acquiring Social Security because the former was not necessary to find a job – another major concern. He further explains this difference by characterizing Social Security as a tax responsibility to the country, while citizenship merely grants one rights that could not be given without sustaining the country through taxes in the first place.[63] Other Vietnamese Americans recounted applying for Social Security as one of their first tasks to become acclimated to their new home. Khoan Hữu Lê, who hailed from a poor background, settled in Ohio in 1981 as part of the second wave of refugees. He remembered some of his first tasks as signing up for Social Security and welfare, as well as enrolling his children in school.[64] When asked about her "initial feelings and experiences" during her first few days in the United States, Thảo Nguyễn recalled the complications of paperwork and documentation in acquiring a green card and Social Security.[65] After arriving in Marietta, Georgia in 1982, Đức Trí Phạm's sponsor

[63]Tuấn Anh Nguyễn interview by Desiree Nguyen, *Vietnamese American Experience Class Oral Histories, 2015 Spring*, Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project, Life Stories of Vietnamese Americans in Southern California, University of California, Irvine, May 16, 2015, 5, 9, 25.

[64]Khoan Hữu Lê interview by Michelle Le Pham, *Oral Histories from The Grove Senior Apartments in Garden Grove, California*, Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project, Life Stories of Vietnamese Americans in Southern California, University of California, Irvine, September 15, 2012, 15.

[65]Thảo Nguyễn interview by Mai Nguyen, *Vietnamese American Experience Class Oral Histories, 2012 Fall*, Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project, Life Stories of Vietnamese Americans in Southern California, University of California, Irvine, November 19, 2012, 17.

from the International Rescue Committee immediately helped him apply for Social Security and food stamps the following day.[66]

The August 1978 issue of the *New Life Digest* also devotes an article to Social Security. It begins by describing the fundamental aspects of Social Security – how it is funded and paid – and proceeds to discuss the different types of monthly benefit checks: retirement, disability, and survivors' checks (*Chi phiếu hữu trí, Chi phiếu tàn phế bất lực,* and *Chi phiếu thừa kế nhân*). The next section about eligibility is noticeably longer than the previous two, which may indicate the main concern for refugees: who qualifies for Social Security? According to the article, most Vietnamese refugees that work are now enrolled in the program, but "it will be several years before they can begin to obtain benefits from it."[67]

ĐỜI SỐNG MỚI

NEW LIFE

THÁNG TÁM, 1976

AUGUST, 1976

Phòng Ngừa Bệnh Cúm

Flu Shots Coming

Ngày Tựu Trường

Back to School

Lá Thư Giám Đốc

A Message from the Director

*Figure 3. Front page of the August 1976 issue of Đời Sống Mới Sưu Tập*

Five elements of adaptation were highlighted by the *New Life Digest* and *Tiên Rồng*: studying English, employment, education, legal knowledge, and enrolling in Social Security. Their articles were written with the purpose of helping new Vietnamese arrivals settle and survive in American life. However, I must note one

[66]Đức Trí Phạm interview by Michelle Le Pham, *Vietnamese American Experience Class Oral Histories, 2012 Winter*, Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project, Life Stories of Vietnamese Americans in Southern California, University of California, Irvine, February 25, 2012, 10.

[67]"*Bảo đảm An sinh* (Security for Tomorrow)", *Đời Sống Mới Sưu Tập (New Life Digest)* (Washington, D.C.), vol. 2, August 1978, 4.

last instrumental factor that is perhaps taken for granted compared to more conscious ones like learning a new language: health. The prioritization of adaptation, and more specifically health, is featured by the front page of the 1976 issue of the *New Life Digest* on an article titled "Flu Shots Coming" (*Phòng Ngừa Bệnh Cúm*).[68] It includes the refugees as part of the larger American nation, stating that "Indochinese refugees, along with the rest of the American population, will be urged to get free flu shots this fall to avoid getting a newly-discovered kind of flu this winter."[69] The article informs the reader of the ever-changing nature of influenza, which requires the creation of a new vaccine. President Ford's bill that started a campaign to immunize nearly every American against swine flu was described as "the largest inoculation program ever attempted anywhere."[70] Even the announcement of a vaccination program is framed in the context of assimilation for the Vietnamese American community. While these characteristics of adaptation would typically be framed in other scholarship as profound contributions to Vietnamese American identity or the "model minority", it is important to understand them through more practical lenses.

## II. Immigration

Vietnamese immigration, and that of Southeast Asians as a whole, was another point of extreme interest for Vietnamese refugees, not only because of the obvious connection to their own experiences but also due to an issue briefly mentioned before: family still in Vietnam. To this, they were seeking to help construct new lives while simultaneously assimilating themselves

[68]The Vietnamese title for this article actually translates to "Preventing influenza". Again, his may call into question the accuracy of the translations from this newspaper, although I noticed that their translations became more accurate in the volume referenced extensively earlier in this section, published two years later.

[69]"Phòng Ngừa Bệnh Cúm (Flu Shots Coming)", *Đời Sống Mới Sưu Tập (New Life Digest)* (Washington, D.C.), vol. 2, no. 8, August 1976, p. 1

[70]"Phòng Ngừa Bệnh Cúm (Flu Shots Coming)", 1.

into their new home in their own. I argue that a significant part of the diaspora's transnational connection to its home country was exhibited through its concern with immigration. In current literature of the Vietnamese American experience, the diaspora's relationship with Vietnam mainly revolves ideas of retaining traditions and opposing the communist regime – both significant aspects of the diaspora's relationship with its home country, to be sure – but the prospect of reuniting families and consolidating a Vietnamese ethnic group through immigration is often understated. This concern with immigration as demonstrated in the periodicals suggests another fundamental need with refugees – proximity to family and perhaps by extension, other Vietnamese people. Again, Vietnamese refugees during this period had inadequate ethnic networks to facilitate an easier process of acclimation, which necessitated more immigrant groups. While periodicals in the late 1970s noted the initial mass exodus from Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia to host countries, the 1980s paid close attention to any obstacles to refugee acceptance and settlement, such as government quotas and political prisoners in remaining in Vietnam.

In the first issue of *Tiên Rồng*, the first news article discusses the number of Vietnamese refugees being accepted to host countries: 144,000 to the United States, 20,000 to 30,000 to France, and 6,000 to Canada.[71] This mass exodus is attributed to the "harsh North Vietnamese political and economic controls with grinding poverty, unemployment and loss of personal rights". At this time, an estimated 200,000 to 500,000 South Vietnamese had been sent to reeducation camps (*trại học tập cải tạo*), prison camps aimed at the indoctrination and subjugation of groups that were associated with the South Vietnamese government, as well as

[71]"Up to date", *Tiên Rồng, the Viet Newsletter* (Roanoke, VA), volume 1, 1977, 9.

civilians, during the war.[72] In addition, over 1 million people were displaced out of cities and into jungles and other "underdeveloped areas" under the New Economic Zones program (*Xây dựng các vùng kinh tế mới*). These factors contribute to the migration of hundreds each month, not only from Vietnam but also Cambodia and Laos – countries where communists have "consolidated their old". Even so, officials estimate that half to two-thirds of escapees do not reach safety.[73]

This concern with refugee movements from Vietnam persisted through the 1980s as Vietnamese refugees continued to enter the country. In 1984, 10,000 former reeducation camp prisoners emigrated to the United States. A 1989 issue of a Vietnamese American magazine from Houston, titled *Beautiful* (*Đẹp*), primarily focused on entertainment subjects. However, it includes less leisurely ones, as well. A section is entirely dedicated to the issue of Vietnamese refugees, titled "Vietnamese refugees abroad" (*Việt kiều tỵ nạn tại hải ngoại*). An article titled "Decreasing the amount of refugees from Southeast Asia in order to increase the amount of refugees from the Soviet Union" (*Giảm bớt người tỵ nạn từ Đông Nam Á để có thể gia tăng nhận người tỵ nạn từ Liên Sô*) discusses the decreasing amount of Vietnamese refugees coming to the United States under the Orderly Departure Program (ODP).[74] The main reason why the number of ODP refugees has decreased is due to the problem of political prisoners in Vietnam,

[72]"Reeducation camp" is the term usually used to refer to these prison camps, although the literal translation for their name means "to transform" (*cải*) and "to create" (*tạo*) – the re-creation of individuals who served under anti-communist ideology.

[73]"Up to date", 9.

[74]The Orderly Departure Program allowed for the safe immigration and resettlement of Vietnamese to the United States and other countries. Created in 1979 by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the ODP aimed to mitigate the dangerous conditions surrounding the exodus of the numerous "boat people" who had left Vietnam after the war.

specifically those who have been in reeducation camps since the war ended, have not been able to leave the country thus far, and likely will not for this year.[75]

The discussion of these issues of immigration bespeak the interest in refugee and immigration issues amongst the Vietnamese American community. Besides family-related matters, why would Vietnamese refugees still be concerned about these issues of migration when they had already trekked through that experience? For one, class and occupational distinction still existed amongst Vietnamese refugees despite the "social upheaval" of the refugee process. Those formerly from the elite class in Vietnam stressed that the "lower class" refugees (fisherman, farmers, and even prostitutes, thieves, and other "undesirable elements") would "only make it more difficult for the rest of the Vietnamese" – stressing the liability they posed for the progress of Vietnamese Americans as a whole.[76] Lieu argues that this aim to preserve class difference demonstrates the "keen awareness of U.S. immigration policy" that was equally applicable to all Vietnamese refugees. More specifically, there was a perceived need to appear "presentable" or follow the American archetype of being more Westernized or "well-educated" in order to not be a burden to the government.[77] Much like the notion of the urgency to learn English, the concern with immigration is also indicative of the process of Americanization and why it would be of significance to the refugees. As I previously argued, however, this was not

[75]"Giảm bớt người tỵ nạn từ Đông Nam Á để có thể gia tăng nhận người tỵ nạn từ Liên Sô", *Đẹp* (Houston, TX), 1989, 34. "những người tỵ nạn Việt Nam thuộc loại này hầu hết là các tù nhân chính trị, hay những người bị tù cải tạo đã chẳng thể dời Việt Nam từ nhiều năm nay, cũng sẽ không thể dời Việt Nam trong năm nay"

[76]Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 15. It should be noted that while the refugee community was heavily diverse, this dichotomy between upper-class and lower-class persons of the refugee demographic is not fully representative. However, Lieu contends that this notion does reveal the existence of class distinctions that is worth exploring.

[77]Lieu, 16.

the manifestation of a need to forge an ideal minority identity but signified a fundamental need to adapt to American ways of life.

In addition, they still felt connected to the existing nation of Vietnam. Lieu explains that while they had fled the country, their remaining relatives and memories associated with their country of origin result in the "cultural politics of exile communities" always being in dialogue with those of the current nation.[78] This point about remaining relatives is especially important as a number of those undoubtedly wanted to make bringing their families to their new countries possible – an issue of being reunited with family rather than remaining identified with their home nation. This will become more obvious in the following section about politics – the staunch anti-communist stance of the Vietnamese diaspora that persists to this day.

## III. Politics

In January 1999, a video store owner in Westminster, California displayed the current flag of Vietnam and a picture of Hồ Chí Minh, the communist leader, under the pretense of starting debate and exercising his "American freedom to speak his mind." He was quoted as saying "We should normalize our relations with Vietnam. Even if they are communists, we should support them, help them to change."[79] This incited outrage in the community, with 400

[78]Lieu, 62. Lieu explains this idea of the connection between two different parts of the Vietnamese nation (in Vietnam and abroad) in the context of beauty pageants and how they can be used to express both "cultural nationalism" and anti-communism. In other words, in validates the refugees' existence as an "imagined community" in the world, as well as its "anticommunist political voice." I have utilized this idea as a justification of news coverage of Vietnam's post-war policies and migration statistics even as immigrants were concerned with adapting to an American life.

[79]Donna Foote, "The Siege of Little Saigon," *Newsweek* (New York, NY), Feb. 28, 1999.

demonstrators initially gathering in front of the store to protest the human rights abuses in Vietnam. The crowds eventually reached 15,000, and the owner was attacked by protestors.[80]

One of the defining characteristics of the Vietnamese American community – that is in fact an exception to the distinctions between first and second-wave refugees – is its strong anti-communist activism, which has been referenced extensively in scholarship and Vietnamese American media as an instrumental characteristic of the community. In this section, however, I contend that the community was also learning to become civic participants in a different democracy and to advocate for their political needs, which can be defined as being specific to their own local communities or gaining a platform to oppose communism back home, such as in the case of the 1999 protests.

Despite the recent opening of Vietnam to commerce and tourism, anti-communism still pervades the relationship between the Vietnamese diaspora and the homeland. Four decades after the end of the war, the overseas community largely still perceives Vietnam as a "repressive communist country with a corrupt government that continues to commit human rights violations against its people," according to Lieu.[81]

This sentiment largely stems from the post-war experience of many of the refugees before they fled. Đàn Thế Lê listed several features of the repressive life under the communist government: prohibition of radio, indoctrination into the supposed virtues of the communism, sudden arrests, and a watchful eye from a party cadre – "freedom of thought, freedom of expressions, none of that exist[s] and it's scary."[82] When asked about the quality of life after the

[80]Matthew Ebnet, "SPECIAL REPORT * A year after a Little Saigon merchant touched off protests by displaying a Vietnamese flag . . . A Divided Community Returns to Daily Life." *The Los Angeles Time* (Los Angeles, CA), January 15, 2000.

[81]Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, xiii.

[82]Đàn Thế Lê interview, 7.

war, Jonathan Nguyễn simply stated that it was "not good at all." He emphasized the impact on all families regardless of economic position; people were not allowed to roam freely or own businesses, affluent families were stripped of their possessions, and money no longer had any value. Conditions were so adverse that many fell mentally ill or resorted to suicide.[83] Loan Phạm Thái recounted a similar experience of possessions being taken away and the government recording all aspects of life: money, property, jewelry, food, business, activities, and more.[84] Together with the human rights violations that were characteristic of reeducation camps, life under the new government had only reinforced anti-communist sentiment of the refugees that fled.[85] Hence, politics, specifically criticism of communist regimes, were often found in Vietnamese American periodicals.

The periodicals display an effort to observe the communist government's policy changes. The first news topic in the "News Summary" (*Tin Tóm Lược*) section of the August 1976 issue of the *New Life Digest* covers "recent diplomatic moves by Vietnam" that are considered an effort to improve its world image. This included the release of thirty-nine Americans and ten Vietnamese wives who were not evacuated during the Fall of Saigon, as well as improved relations with Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.[86] However, the article is skeptic of these measures. An unnamed Western ambassador was quoted as saying "… they've been revolutionaries for 30 years. They're a vigorous people and they believe that communism is the right system, not just for themselves, but for all of Southeast Asia, for the

[83]Jonathan Nguyễn interview, 16.
[84]Loan Phạm Thái interview, 3-4.
[85]Pelaud, *This Is All I Choose to Tell*, 9.
[86]"Tin Tóm Lược (News Summary)" *Đời Sống Mới Sưu Tập (New Life Digest)* (Washington, D.C.), vol. 2, no. 8, August 1976, 2.

whole world, in fact. They've stated this openly for years, and there's no reason to believe that they're about to alter their basic doctrine now."

This quote is suggestive of the Cold War environment that loomed large during this period, especially with the expansion of communism throughout Southeast Asian countries. It also correlates with a strong opposition to normalizing relations with Vietnam on the part of the Vietnamese American community. They had prioritized severing ties with the communist government, believing that economic isolation would render Vietnam in need of assistance from Western democratic powers. In fact, this initial refusal to begin economic relations with Vietnam, Lieu argues, resulted in "new forms of surveillance imposed from within."[87] For example, any outward approval of normalizing economic relations and/or doing business with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was subject to death threats from the community.[88] Therefore, skepticism towards Vietnam's efforts to improve its foreign relations found in these periodicals is not inconceivable.

The periodical also highlights the dire conditions in Vietnam during this time. *The Washington Post* had quoted a repatriated American as saying "Conditions in Saigon are difficult and getting worse" – communist authorities were withholding food from citizens in an attempt to displace them to the countryside as part of the New Economic Zones program. *The New York Times* corroborated this statement with a quote from another American in the area, stating that Saigon is "not a very nice place these days," with no support or food being given to those displaced to the countryside.[89] Furthermore, the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital in the city had been made exclusive to the military and party cadres. The section ends by describing the

[87]Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 36.
[88]Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 37.
[89]"Tin Tóm Lược (News Summary)", 2.

extensive resettlement of Saigon residents to the "new economic zones" – 600,000 of its 3,500,000 people had already been relocated, with another million set to leave. These residents were to settle into 200 new villages.[90] Lastly, Vietnam had also begun drafting men for military service for the first time since the war ended. Miserable conditions, unequal treatment, displacement of citizens, the prospect of another military conflict, and the existence of reeducation camps characterized the communist regime in a negative light and fueled opposition in the diaspora.

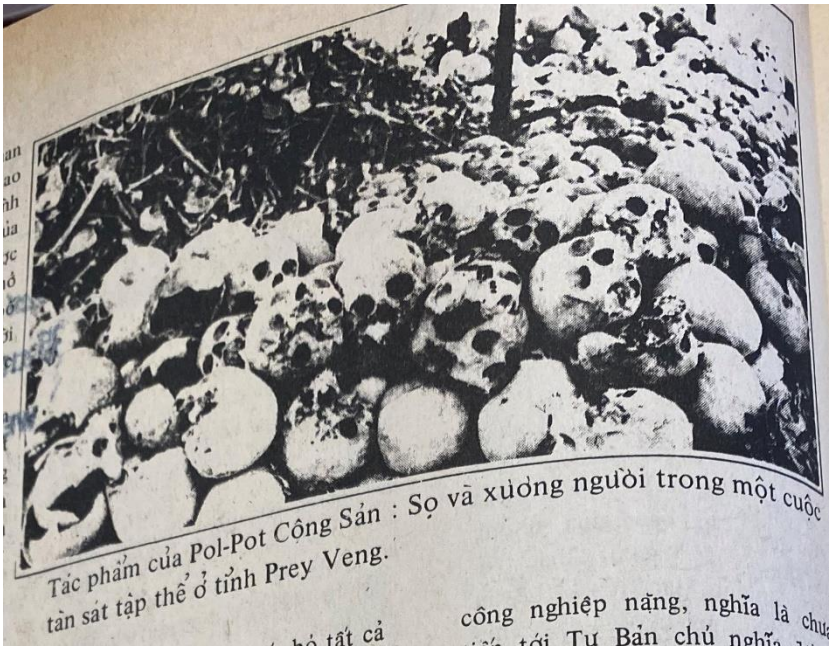


*Figure 4. The inclusion of this photo in Khai Phóng demonstrates the magazine's depiction of communist regimes as ruthless dictatorships. The caption reads: "The work of the Pol Pot communists: skulls and human bones of a massacre in Prey Veng Province."*

Perhaps most representative of the community's interest in the politics of Vietnam is a magazine entirely dedicated to discussing this very topic. The Ethnic Cultural and Political Magazine (*Khai Phóng: Tạp Chí Văn Hóa Chính Trị Dân Tộc*), published in Los Angles during the 1980s, documents the politics of Vietnam after 1975. A 1983 issue of *Khai Phóng* begins with a section titled "The dictatorial nature of the Communist Party of Vietnam: Dictatorship of the proletariat" (*Bản Chất Độc Tài Của Chế Độ Cộng Sản Việt Nam: Chuyên Chính Vô Sản)*. It examines the ideology of Marxism-Leninism –

[90]"Tin Tóm Lược (News Summary)", 2.

the proletariat specifically – in detail within context of the Communist Party of Vietnam, as well as other Asian communist governments such as China under Mao Zedong and Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge.[91]

This interest in the state of the communist regime in Vietnam persisted to the end of the decade. A magazine from Fountain Valley, California issued in 1990, *Firestorm* (*Bão Lửa*) contains a similar approach to that of *Khai Phóng* in its analysis of communist ideology. "The dead end of the Vietnamese communist regime" (*Đường Cùng Của Chế Độ Cộng Sản Việt Nam*) by Việt Dương describes the struggle between capitalism and communism (*Tư Bản - Cộng sản: Ai thắng ai?*). Furthermore, the author compares the characteristics of communist governments from around the world (primarily in the Soviet bloc, including Hungary and Poland) and those of Vietnam.[92] Dương attempts to predict the trajectory of the communist regime in Vietnam and its fate. This was characteristic of the world climate at the time, questioning the fate of communism as the Soviet Union was to dissolve the following year.

Not only were Vietnamese Americans interested in the politics related to their homeland, but the periodicals display their need to remain informed about the politics pertaining to them in the United States. An example is the newspaper *Pioneers* (*Tiên Phong*), which was published in Arlington, Virginia from the mid-1970s to the 1980s. The political activism of refugees is the focal point of a 1982 article titled "Vietnamese refugees will soon be supported" (*Tỵ Nạn Việt Nam Sắp Được O Bế*). It asserts that the 650,000 Southeast Asian refugees living in the United States, 36 percent of them in California, can influence an election by voting.[93] For example,

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[91]"Bản Chất Độc Tài Của Chế Độ Cộng Sản Việt Nam: Chuyên Chính Vô Sản", *Khai Phóng: Tạp Chí Văn Hóa Chính Trị Dân Tộc* (Los Angeles, CA), vol. 11, 1983, 1-3.

[92]Việt Dương. "Đường Cùng Của Chế Độ Cộng Sản Việt Nam", *Bão Lửa* (Fountain Valley, CA), 1990, 71. "Từ thực tại của chế độ xã hội chủ nghĩa Mác-xít trên thế gới" and "Từ thực tại của chế độ Cộng sản Việt Nam"

[93]"Tỵ Nạn Việt Nam Sắp Được O Bế", *Tiên Phong* (Arlington, VA), vol. 190, 1982, 4.

then-mayor of Westminster, California Kathy Buchoz was 288 votes away from winning an election, an outcome that could have been changed if Vietnamese Americans had participated. Buchoz was considered an ally of the Vietnamese American community after having voted against the 1981 petition calling for the prevention of Vietnamese Americans from obtaining business licenses.[94] According to the article, she believes politicians will soon realize the voting power of refugees and will gear their platforms towards their needs. The end of the article makes an interesting statement that reveals the nuances of Vietnamese American presence in politics: "In the opinion of some Americans, although we refugees have anticommunist spirit, we must also strongly exhibit our own political tendencies."[95] While the Vietnamese American community has long been associated with anti-communism, their political concerns are more complex than this Cold War-centric ideology. They were required to consider their own positions in their new communities and how they could influence legislation that would benefit them as refugees. By extension, this civic voice could give them a platform to fight communism. Thus, Vietnamese Americans were simultaneously attentive to the politics in Vietnam (as they informed the anti-communist movement in the Vietnamese diaspora) and the politics in their own community.

While the anti-communist rhetoric of the community is a major facet of its identity, I stress that it is not merely a result of Americanization or a manifestation of Vietnamese American identity formation as current literature may be inclined to suggest. Even after the United States no longer maintained a presence in Vietnam, Vietnamese citizens had many reasons to be opposed to communism as an ideology and institution. The post-war experiences of

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[94]Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, 35.

[95]"Tỵ Nạn Việt Nam Sắp Được O Bế", 4. "Theo nhận xét của một số người Hoa Kỳ, mặc dù người tỵ nạn chúng ta đều có tinh thần chống cộng, chúng ta còn phải biểu lộ mạnh mẽ những khuynh hướng chính trị của chúng ta nữa."

refugees such as Đàn Thế Lê, Loan Phạm Thái, and Jonathan Nguyễn reveal that the repressive conditions under the communist government facilitate a personal struggle with that same regime; this conflict is capable of being independent from Cold War narratives and a discussion of the role of the United States in the war that often appears in scholarship. This is not to dismiss the imperial malfeasance of the United States as described by scholars such as Bui and Espiritu, but emphasizing this factor potentially obscures the validity of Vietnam's struggle with a communist government after the war: surveillance, confiscation of possessions, and a general lack of freedom.

Furthermore, anti-communist sentiment did not develop dependently as a part of Vietnamese American identity formation and a continuation of Cold War rhetoric.[96] In fact, the periodicals and oral histories suggest that anti-communist sentiment developed before the mass exodus. One must consider the direct reasons why a refugee crisis existed to begin with. In all, a strong opposition to communism emerged as a result of the refugees' personal experiences with the new regime, as shown by their accounts of post-war life and the periodicals' consistent coverage of communist ideology. Its consequences (a refusal to normalize relations between the diaspora and the Vietnamese government) indicated a process of civic development that was associated with their political participation, not necessarily building an identity. Thus, the Vietnamese American community's preoccupation with Vietnam's current government during this period should not be merely attributed to Americanization and a process of identity formation.

[96]Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, xxiii. Lieu characterizes Vietnamese refugees as "embracing their new role as the ethnic 'suburban warriors' who would lead the crusade against communist forces, mainly the regime currently holding power in Vietnam."

## Conclusion

In his interview, Khoan Hữu Lê was asked about his time in Vietnam after the war and before his departure. He had a been a university professor prior to the end of the war who had been forced to become a rice farmer, as the new communist government refused to grant him a teaching position. This may lead one to conclude he must have been conflicted about such a drastic change in his own purpose and identity. However, he stated, "Of course, but at that time I didn't have time to think too much about it. I was more concerned with figuring out a way to find a living, finding food. I did everything and anything."[97] This statement is characteristic of the initial Vietnamese American experience, especially with the second-wave immigrants who were generally less prepared to easily adapt to a new life in the United States. While one's identity was undoubtedly facing crisis after the war, more rudimentary and urgent needs were required to be met first.

Scholarship on the Vietnamese American experience has been overwhelmingly focused on questions of identity formation and cultural retention: generational gaps, a desire to hold on to Vietnamese traditions, and what it means to be Vietnamese American. While these questions are significant in telling the broader story of Vietnamese Americans, they overlook the fundamental and more mundane aspects of the refugees' initial journeys in the United States, which are just as crucial to a deeper understanding of their history. What were refugees truly concerned with when they arrived? What was at the forefront of their minds before attempting to reconcile their sense of self? Furthermore, the nuances between the first and second wave of refugees has primarily been examined with a cursory approach. How were these differences reflected in the second wave's experiences and concerns?

[97]Khoan Hữu Lê interview, 10.

These periodicals, many of which were published in Vietnamese enclaves in the United States (Southern California, Houston, and Washington, D.C.) as the second wave of refugees were arriving, and oral histories were indicative of the most pressing issues on their minds – adaptation, immigration, and politics. Adaptation consisted of several facets, and many of the subjects that were interviewed noted the issues of learning English, obtaining Social Security, the importance of education, and finding employment as their initial objectives upon arriving to the U.S. Coverage of Southeast Asian immigration and American policies loomed large as refugees looked to be reunited with their loved ones still in Vietnam and were worried about how their own lives would be affected. Finally, the civic development of Vietnamese Americans was a result of what led them to their exodus (hardships from the repressive policies of the new communist government) and served to inform them of how to participate in order to obtain their local political goals, as well as combat communism.

This study raises further questions of how Vietnamese American periodicals in present day reflect the development of the diaspora's concerns. Over four decades after the first wave set foot into the U.S., how have perspectives changed? How has the Internet influenced the coverage of issues pertinent to Vietnamese Americans? What has replaced learning English as significant enough to cover a front page? The relationship between the diaspora and communist Vietnam is still fraught with tension. It is worth examining how current Vietnamese American newspapers address these interests, as well as others pertaining to the United States. Tracing the trajectory of these periodicals can offer a refreshing avenue of scholarship on the Vietnamese American experience.

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