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Transforming Vietnamese American Women's Gender Roles: The Emergence of a 1.5 Political Generation within Project Ngoc

THESIS

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DEDICATION

To

my parents, Thanhson Thi Nguyen and Thanh Van Nguyen

in taking the chance all those years ago to escape Vietnam
for me to be where I am today.

Chậm mà chắc. Còn nước, còn tát.

Slowly but surely. While there is still life, there is hope.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Refugee trauma profoundly shapes Vietnamese American collective identity, as is evident in the largest Vietnamese diasporic community located in Orange County, California. Trauma resulting from the violence of the Vietnam War and the process of refugee resettlement led Vietnamese Americans to uphold certain gendered ideologies as traditional. Doing so centered a particular type of family as the basis for community restoration. This refugee family project placed pressure on daughters to be obedient and responsible for the continuation of the family line. This way of thinking prevented women from pursuing personal endeavors to attain individual empowerment. Instead, they were to focus on taking care of the family and home. However, as the experiences of three Vietnamese 1.5 generation women, Mai-Phuong Nguyen, Nicole Nguyen, and Tu-Uyen Nguyen, demonstrated, this was not the only way of being. Through their involvement with Project Ngoc, a humanitarian student organization at the University of California, Irvine, these women transformed traditional Vietnamese gendered ideologies that prioritized community empowerment to also include individual empowerment. They created a new

form of political leadership for the 1.5 generation that focused on the community and the individual. In doing so, they created an alternative understanding of kinship and community responsibility. They practiced a political form of generational and community transition, one that empowered youth, particularly young women, to pursue individual growth and community development.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the lives and oral histories of three women, Dr. Mai-Phuong Nguyen, Cô Nicole Nguyen, and Professor Tu-Uyen Nguyen. All three were active in Project Ngoc, a student-led, humanitarian organization active from 1987 to 1997 at the University of California, Irvine (UCI). Deeply influenced by their involvement in Project Ngoc, Dr. Mai-Phuong became a community physician, Cô Nicole serves as a project manager at Kaiser Permanente (one of the largest health care consortiums in the U.S.), and Professor Tu-Uyen teaches Asian American Studies at California State University, Fullerton. [1] By analyzing their political labor, this thesis will explore how Project Ngoc became the focal turning point for each of these women to challenge gendered ideologies in the Vietnamese American community and emerge as part of a new generation of political leaders in Southern California.

Vietnamese American communities have been shaped by refugee trauma, which stems from violence during the Vietnam War and the forced migration from their homeland. Given this historical context, some families uphold "traditional" gender roles and ideologies as an effort to reconstitute the family in their displaced homes. This family project requires obedience and labor from daughters. These women's involvement in Project Ngoc prove that the 1.5 generation does not need to fully align its own values with these gendered ideologies. Project Ngoc provided Dr. Mai-Phuong, Cô Nicole, and Professor Tu-Uyen with the space to develop independent political views and a capacity to provide

[1] In the Vietnamese community, individuals are referred to on a first name basis with the appropriate honorific or title preceding their names. In this thesis, I will be referring to each woman by their title and first name (i.e. Dr. Mai-Phuong, Cô Nicole, and Professor Tu-Uyen) to privilege the Vietnamese form of identification and indicate my respect for them. In the Vietnamese language, "Cô" can either be a biological aunt or a female elder.

leadership for the community. As they did so, they began a new type of family lineage, a political generation – one that redefined "loyalty" to the family and community through political autonomy.

Refugee Trauma and the Control of Daughters

Refugee trauma, which has become a prominent part of Vietnamese diasporic identity, was a result of war and forced migration. War, displacement, and marginalization caused economic and political hardships in the Vietnamese community. From December 19, 1946 to August 1, 1954, the people of Vietnam spent eight years fighting for independence from French colonial rule and Japanese invaders in the First Indochina War. A few months later, turmoil began again with the U.S.-backed conflicts that lasted from November 1, 1955 to April 30, 1975. This twenty-year period wreaked havoc on all parts of Vietnam; even minority and indigenous groups were brought into the war as the jungles of Vietnam became prime targets for the United States' military. Strict regulations also were implemented after the Vietnam War to prevent the Vietnamese people from being able to freely leave. Those who were against the Northern Vietnamese government were imprisoned in reeducation camps.[2] Many would never make it out alive. For those who did, their children were barred from seeking higher education. This would stunt future economic opportunities and keep them constrained to a life of poverty.[3] In an effort to give their children better lives and also for the family's survival as well, Vietnamese people

[2] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 9.
"Reeducation" in Vietnam was aimed primarily at intellectuals and political leaders.
[3] Ibid, 9.

began to plan their escape out of the country. They were scared of trapping their children and future generations in lives of poverty. This led thousands of Vietnamese to flee Vietnam in search of political freedom and better economic opportunities.[4] The American government offered sanctuary to Vietnamese refugees to symbolically win a war that they played a central role in initiating.[5]

Much of the trauma experienced by Vietnamese Americans is linked to the tragedies of the Vietnam War. The conflicts and their aftermath led to loss of family and friends as well as the forced migration out of their homeland. This refugee trauma has become an integral part of the Vietnamese American identity. While first generation Vietnamese Americans had firsthand experience with war and displacement, refugee trauma was also experienced by the 1.5 generation. They were much younger, being born in Vietnam or in refugee sites in Southeast Asia before migrating to the United States as children or teenagers. Due to their collective experience of loss and trauma, it was especially important for the Vietnamese refugee community to reconstitute pre-war Vietnamese culture in their new homes. Pressure was placed on daughters to continue past lives, thereby straining and constraining the lives of 1.5 generation women.[6] They were expected to balance conflicting cultural expectations from their families, communities, and the larger society.[7]

Dr. Mai-Phuong Nguyen's experiences demonstrate how trauma can arise from the act of migration. In her eyes, Vietnam was no longer a home for her. For many other

[4] Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: the Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(Es)* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2014), 14.
[5] Ibid, 5.
[6] Linda Trinh Võ, "'Defiant Daughters': The Resilience and Resistance of 1.5-Generation Vietnamese American Women," *Our Voices, Our Histories: Asian American and Pacific Islander Women* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2020), pp. 205-220, 205.
[7] Ibid.

refugees, this became true as well. As she remarked, "My one and only clear-cut, vivid memory is the day we left Vietnam and that day is emblazoned in my life and my family history."[8] From what Dr. Mai-Phuong recalled, her family was extremely privileged because her father worked for the Vietnamese press. He was a teletype translator who interpreted the latest news concerning the country from French or English broadcasts into Vietnamese.[9] She was one of the lucky ones, as her family left Vietnam early without risk of being caught. Under the U.S. government's protection, they left on April 29, 1975, one day prior to the reunification of Vietnam. Despite being grateful for the chance to escape, her family's journey on the USS Midway continues to haunt her. She recalled as a six-year-old, being given canned tuna and graham crackers for sustenance while on the ship. Dr. Mai-Phuong commented that "they [the foods] were not really a part of [the Vietnamese peoples'] staple, but as a kid growing up in the U.S. in subsequent years, whenever I eat graham crackers or canned tuna, I would get a flashback to those days on the USS Midway."[10] Although Dr. Mai-Phuong is now safe in the United States, the taste of canned tuna remains a vivid reminder of the trauma she experienced as she fled her home country; the foods evoke her identity as a refugee.

In addition to the trauma of forced migration, the Vietnamese community experienced racial marginalization and cultural isolation.[11] In the U.S. and in other receiving countries, refugees became seen as *a* problem to be solved. Instead of focusing on the global historical conditions that caused the massive displacement of refugees, the

[8] Mai-Phuong Nguyen, Interviewed by Lotusa Chan, Irvine, CA, March 02, 2012.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Linda Trinh Vo, "'Defiant Daughters': The Resilience and Resistance of 1.5-Generation Vietnamese American Women," *Our Voices, Our Histories: Asian American and Pacific Islander Women* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2020), pp. 205-220, 205.

American media highlighted individual refugee needs and hence their dependence on American generosity.[12] The American public was not very receptive towards this newer group of immigrants. In a 1975 Harris poll, more than 50 percent of polled Americans felt that Southeast Asian refugees should be excluded.[13] Furthermore, only 26 percent of Americans favored their entry into the United States.[14] As the first war to be broadcast on television, the media's portrayal of the Vietnam War generated negative tropes concerning the Vietnamese people. Subsequent mainstream cultural films, like *Full Metal Jacket*, also promoted these kinds of images as well.[15] As a result, racial discrimination against Vietnamese refugees became common.

Public hostility towards the Vietnamese people made community networks all the more important. The refugees who arrived in the United States tended to come from collectivist societies. The desire to reform families and reconnect with friends resulted in the creation of numerous Vietnamese American communities throughout the United States. The largest established Vietnamese American communities are in California, New York City, Chicago, Houston, Seattle, Virginia, and New Orleans.[16] Among these locations, Orange County in Southern California has emerged as the most prominent and well-known, becoming home to the largest population of Vietnamese Americans in the United States.[17] The act of relocating into areas with high densities of Vietnamese became a form of refugee survival.

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[12] Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 5.
[13] Ibid, 82.
[14] Ibid, 82.
[15] *Full Metal Jacket*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (Warner Bros, 1987).
[16] Linda Trinh Võ, "Vietnamese American Trajectories: Dimensions of Diaspora," *Amerasia Journal* 29, no. 1 (January 2003): ix–xviii, https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.29.1.t8kvv26307580520, xii.
[17] "A Community of Contrasts: Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in Orange County", 8.

This was true for the families of the three interviewees, who all relocated to Orange County. Dr. Mai-Phuong Nguyen and her family moved from Indian Town Gap, Pennsylvania to Washington D.C. to Fairfax, Virginia before finally settling in California. Her family chose this high density of Vietnamese people, because her father was an insurance salesman who relied on Vietnamese American clientele.[18] Cô Nicole Nguyen and her family resided in Lawton, Oklahoma for ten years before making the move to Orange County to be closer to their family.[19] Professor Tu-Uyen Nguyen and her family initially arrived in Virginia. However, they also made the decision soon afterwards to relocate to California. Her parents wanted to be relicensed as a pharmacist and dentist in an area that was more racially tolerant to Vietnamese refugees.[20]

For these women and others in the 1.5 generational cohort, their political consciousness was shaped by the traumas that their families experienced. These challenges manifested themselves emotionally, mentally, and physically. Trauma from war and migration also increased the burden of the 1.5 generation, who were expected to help their family navigate American culture. Since they had a better grasp on the English language, the 1.5 generation often served as cultural brokers, interpreters, and intermediaries for their elders. As Viet Thanh Nguyen articulates, "war involves so many because war is inseparable from the diverse domestic life of the [American] nation."[21] The traumas that war leaves on the Vietnamese people become sites of memory – places where ghosts reside.[22] Nguyen argues that the aftermath of war haunts the living survivors – survivors

[18] Mai-Phuong Nguyen, Interviewed by Lotusa Chan, Irvine, CA, March 02, 2012.
[19] Nicole Nguyen, Interviewed by Malessa Tem, Yorba Linda, CA, February 26, 2012.
[20] Tu-Uyen Nguyen, Interviewed by Kassandra Tong, Fullerton, CA, April 30, 2012.
[21] Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 9.
[22] Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 107.

who then pass their guilt onto the newer generations. Through their decisions and actions, parents consciously and subconsciously pass down this guilt and trauma.[23]

In this process, family and community silences resulting from war, displacement, and racial marginalization presented acute challenges for 1.5 generation immigrants as they navigated their Vietnamese cultural identity. Trauma became an unspoken phenomenon within the culture; it was acknowledged but not discussed by the Vietnamese community. The act of staying silent and not questioning the past became the not-ideal solution for creating family connectedness and peace.[24] As a way to prevent parents in the Vietnamese refugee community from being reminded of the tragedies of war, younger members of refugee families often adopted a "don't ask, don't tell" strategy. Vietnamese children implicitly knew to not ask their parents about potentially painful migration history. Thus, the 1.5 generation absorbed the message to not talk back or ask questions. Silence was seen as necessary for maintenance of the family's emotional survival and well-being.

The silence of daughters and sons became essential for preserving Vietnamese culture and charting a new future together. Cô Nicole, for example, experienced this firsthand growing up. As she stated, "it's not something that my family sits around and talks about, the war. They just don't talk about it."[25] When she later probed the topic further as a young adult in college, her mother abruptly answered by saying, "we don't want to share that with you. It's not something to share."[26] As a result, Cô Nicole was extremely torn in

[23] Võ "'Defiant Daughters'", 206.
[24] Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 166.
[25] Nicole Nguyen, Interviewed by Malessa Tem, Yorba Linda, CA, February 26, 2012.
[26] Ibid.

understanding her identity as a Vietnamese person, because her parents did not feel that it was necessary to teach her and her six siblings about their past.[27] Growing up, she remembered being confused about her identity and where she belonged as a 1.5 generation immigrant.

These uncertainties about identity were compounded by experiences of racialization. Prior to settling into the predominantly Vietnamese community of Orange County, all three women in my study lived in "white America."[28] They attended schools filled with European Americans. For Cô Nicole, who attended a white-run, private Catholic school in Lawton, Oklahoma, public school in California was a rude awakening where she first became exposed to prejudice and racism.[29] Rejected in Oklahoma because she was Vietnamese, Cô Nicole was labeled a "banana" or a "twinkie" by her peers in California because of her inability to speak the Vietnamese language.[30] Additionally, she was bullied every day by her non-Asian classmates with remarks such as "ching chong ching chong" whenever she walked past them.[31] This double form of racial marginalization stripped away her identity as a Vietnamese; she could not find acceptance in the U.S. as an American. Cô Nicole's family moved to California in hopes of joining a socially inclusive Vietnamese community. However, they could not eliminate the disconnected feeling Cô Nicole experienced in trying to manage and reconcile both her Vietnamese and American identities. As a 1.5 generation immigrant, she felt unable to fulfill the two halves of her identity. Additionally, there was added pressure from the Vietnamese refugee community

[27] Nicole Nguyen, Interviewed by Christina Nguyen, Tustin, CA, February 23, 2020.
[28] Mai-Phuong Nguyen, Interviewed by Lotusa Chan, Irvine, CA, March 02, 2012.
[29] Nicole Nguyen, Interviewed by Malessa Tem, Yorba Linda, CA, February 26, 2012.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

to remain "Vietnamese" as this was seen as a way to maintain familial piety. The act of "choosing" to be American would be seen as a betrayal of "being Vietnamese." This racial trauma was one of many significant factors that stops 1.5 generation Vietnamese daughters from wanting to obey their families and community. However, this obedience is seen as key to the Vietnamese cultural identity in the United States.[32]

One strategy some displaced Vietnamese families enacted to reconstitute the normative family structure was to exert tighter control over daughters, particularly by focusing on their education, sexuality, and labor. Many Vietnamese Americans adhere to a social system that traditionally allows men to control and influence the society.[33] In a patriarchal community, it is men who hold power, as expressed through moral authority, social privileges, and economic resources. Women are traditionally given the duty of reproducing the next generation and maintaining the household.[34] While Vietnamese society places pressure onto both genders to maintain the family and uphold the culture, this burden was placed more on young women than on young men. The social expectations around women's reproductive abilities disproportionately burdens them to be the cultural-bearers of their community.

Hardships and tragedies intensified the community's expectation of their daughters. In the context of migrating to a new country, it became crucial for the Vietnamese community to enforce gendered cultural values, because the continuation of these values meant the continuation of Vietnamese tradition.[35] Within the Vietnamese American

[32] Võ, "'Defiant Daughters'" 206.
[33] Nazli Kibria, "Power, Patriarchy, And Gender Conflict in The Vietnamese Immigrant Community," *Gender & Society* 4, no. 1 (1990): pp. 9-24, https://doi.org/10.1177/089124390004001002, 9.
[34] Ibid, 12.
[35] Tu-Uyen Nguyen, Interviewed by Kassandra Tong, Fullerton, CA, April 30, 2012.

experience, ruptures of war, displacement, and loss often lead people to grasp for cultural continuity, overplaying them as "traditional values." These traditional values would be lost to those outside of Vietnam, if they were not imposed onto their daughters. Vietnamese American refugee culture, which is a byproduct of war and trauma, stresses for women to be silent and unheard. Refugee silence is layered onto Confucian Vietnamese ideals of femininity, overdetermining that the culturally respectful female is to be passive, quiet, and obedient.

This strategy intensifies the gendered expectations of women already set in place within the Vietnamese home. The control of "obedient daughters" became a way for the Vietnamese community to reconstitute the family project. This control discouraged women from seeking endeavors that could potentially place the familial space in jeopardy. As Deniz Kandiyoti notes patrilineal rule in Vietnamese culture in Vietnam also appropriates women's labor and progeny if they did not contribute back to the family and community.[36] This causes tension between daughters and the rest of the family. This patriarchal narrative only acknowledged women's achievements in the family household as women were encouraged to prioritize being a wife, homemaker, and mother first.[37] It renders their work and contribution to society as invisible and invaluable, unless their labor is oriented towards the family. This is because women were seen as the ones who could give birth to the next generations of Vietnamese. Therefore, they should focus on doing so, since the community has lost so many of its people due to war and migration. Vietnamese women also faced additional pressures once in the United States. They were expected to obtain a

[36] Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender & Society* 2, no. 3 (1988): pp. 274-290, https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004, 279.
[37] Võ "'Defiant Daughters'", 206.

well-paying career as an economic extension of their need to take care of the family household.

These gendered expectations shaped the perspectives of 1.5 generation daughters like Professor Tu-Uyen. In addition to having to assimilate into American culture and contend with the model minority stereotype, Professor Tu-Uyen remembered the immense stress her parents placed on the importance of keeping with traditional Vietnamese gender roles.[38] As Professor Tu-Uyen remarked, she had an enforced curfew as a young adult, while her brother, who is six years younger, would not have a curfew at all.[39]

Vietnamese gendered expectations also extended to outside of the home, increasing the pressure for 1.5 generation immigrants to fully assimilate into American culture. Silence in the family shaped how these women interacted with other people; it was easier to be quiet and assimilate than it was to speak up. When Professor Tu-Uyen was younger, she recalls that "things like acting properly as a Vietnamese woman [meant] that you're not supposed to speak up or talk back to your elders. You're supposed to be respectful."[40] This expectation extended to the rest of the community as shown by Nicole's experience. Although Cô Nicole wanted to talk back to her bullies in grade school, she felt she could not speak up nor fight back because of racial and Vietnamese gendered expectations for her to be a quiet and respectful daughter. If she did speak up, she would not be respecting her culture.[41]

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[38] Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 6.
The "model minority" myth is an American cultural narrative that assumes that Asian Americans are intellectually superior to other races, hard-working, and docile.
[39] Tu-Uyen Nguyen, Interviewed by Kassandra Tong, Fullerton, CA, April 30, 2012.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Nicole Nguyen, Interviewed by Malessa Tem, Yorba Linda, CA, February 26, 2012.

Both Cô Nicole and Professor Tu-Uyen were expected to be obedient daughters inside and outside of the home, which included the non-familial communities they interacted with as well. However, this controlling of daughters was experienced as being overbearing by the young women. This caused women like Professor Tu-Uyen, Cô Nicole, and Dr. Mai-Phuong to seek out ways to gain autonomy, agency, and empowerment. They did so through Project Ngoc, which offered them the chance to explore and express political activism. While many Vietnamese daughters threaten to leave the familial space, unsatisfied by how they are treated and seen as within the community, these daughters moved towards personal and collective empowerment.

Project Ngoc as an Alternative Space for 1.5 Generation Women

When Dr. Mai-Phuong entered UCI in 1989, she came across Project Ngoc, which became fundamental to her development as an activist and community leader. The organization's mission reminded her of her own experiences as a refugee.[42] As the refugee crisis in Southeast Asia worsened in the mid-1980s with the overcrowding of a number of camps and the forced repatriation of many refugees, Vietnamese American 1.5 generation students at UCI became aware of the lack of economic and political resources for the refugee community. Many of these 1.5 generation students were refugees themselves, who arrived in the United States as children and teenagers. Refugee resettlement continued twenty years after the Vietnam War and illustrates how the legacies of war continue to haunt the Vietnamese diaspora.[43] Having experienced war and/or displacement firsthand

[42] Mai-Phuong Nguyen, Interviewed by Lotusa Chan, Irvine, CA, March 02, 2012.
[43] Project Ngoc, *Project Ngoc Newsletter, Volume II, Number 1*, January 1990, *Online Archive of California*, January 1990, http://www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb5q2nb391/?brand=oac4.

themselves, Project Ngoc activists realized that many refugees awaiting resettlement would have to contend with the same struggles that they experienced. This empathy provided the foundation for their political awakening; they wanted to assist others with similar experiences to themselves. This led to the creation of a coalition of students at UCI which would become Project Ngoc.

Originally inspired by an elective course at UCI, Project Ngoc was started by Vietnamese American students whose personal histories resonated with the tragic stories of Vietnamese refugees stuck in Southeast Asian camps or being sent back to live under a regime they were trying to escape.[44] After learning about these stories, the UCI students wanted to open the eyes of the Vietnamese American community to the plight of Vietnamese refugees.[45] Additionally, some of these students also had firsthand experience with these issues. Founding members of Project Ngoc named the organization after a story they read in class about two Vietnamese refugee sisters, Thuy and Ngoc Lan, who escaped Vietnam by boat.[46] Pirates raped and killed Ngoc, while Thuy was thrown overboard and eventually rescued by a passing ship.[47] Given the community's silence on discussing traumatic incidents, significant stories like this one would not have been preserved without Project Ngoc. These refugee narratives resonated with the 1.5 generation students and motivated them to ensure that Vietnamese voices were heard. Following the successful

[44] Project Ngoc, *UC Irvine Project Ngoc Pamphlet*, n.d., *Online Archive of California*, n.d., http://www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb729006v4/?order=6.
The elective course was taught by Tom Wilson, who was a graduate student at the time in the university.
[45] Deirdre Newman, "UCI Displays Decades-Old Relief Work for Refugees," *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 2012, https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/entertainment/tn-dpt-0831-ngoc-20120830-story.html.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

execution of the class, students wanted more; they wanted a concrete means of assisting refugees instead of merely discussing the tragedies that they experienced.[48]

Some young women, such as Dr. Mai-Phuong, Cô Nicole, and Professor Tu-Uyen, also sought to shift Vietnamese gender ideologies and to empower daughters. In order to achieve more political autonomy, these Vietnamese 1.5 generation women sought answers to questions that their families were unwilling to address. During their transformative years as college students, they found opportunities to get involved with Project Ngoc, which allowed them to explore their complex identities as 1.5 generation Vietnamese American women. They sought to contest the gendered expectations they faced at home through political activism.

It was through their interactions in Project Ngoc that these women became empowered to both challenge and transform traditional cultural ideology concerning the family and gender roles. Project Ngoc allowed participants a way to navigate their cultural roots. At the same time, the organization served as an alternative political space for them to speak up as individuals and remain daughters and sons of the Vietnamese community. As children, these women were encouraged to take care of their family, like mothers would. They continued to feel this need to give back, to serve as guiding figures that they wished to have had as children. By becoming community mentors, they could fulfill both their individual and communal roles. In doing so, they renegotiated their expected roles within Vietnamese gendered ideologies. They transformed these roles by creating space for individual empowerment while still supporting the community. They understood the

[48] "Guide to the Project Ngoc Records MS.SEA.016".

gendered expectations that were placed upon them. However, they also sought to resist and challenge these expectations through their political labor.[49]

Project Ngoc was attractive to 1.5 generation immigrants like Dr. Mai-Phuong, Cô Nicole, and Professor Tu-Uyen because of its focus on advocacy work. The organization empowered students to increase their fellow students' and the general public's awareness about the crisis facing Vietnamese refugees as they escaped on boats and were confined to camps.[50] This produced an alternative form of kinship through advocacy.

Hence, the organization was special in that it allowed Vietnamese 1.5 generation students the chance to serve people who looked like them and who spoke their language. Project Ngoc's efforts were driven by the personal experiences and empathy of its members.[51] It gave them the opportunity to interact with people who shared a similar history to theirs. Furthermore, it presented 1.5 generation immigrants like Dr. Mai-Phuong, Cô Nicole, and Professor Tu-Uyen a direct way of learning about their own past. This also further ignited their interest in political activism for Vietnamese visibility and representation. They wanted to claim space for themselves through political activism, by making previously silenced community concerns visible.

First Phase of Project Ngoc's Active Years

[49] Nicole Nguyen, Interviewed by Christina Nguyen, Tustin, CA, February 23, 2020.
[50] "Guide to the Project Ngoc Records MS.SEA.016".
[51] Marybeth Gasman and Thai-Huy Nguyen, "Cultural Identity and Allegiance Among Vietnamese Students and Their Organizations at the University of California, Irvine: 1980–1990," *Teachers College Record* 117, no. 050301 (May 2015): 1–22, https://www.academia.edu/16099406/Cultural_Identity_and_Allegiance_Among_Vietnamese_Students_and_Their_Organizations_at_the_University_of_California_Irvine_1980_1990, 16.

Dr. Mai-Phuong, Cô Nicole, and Professor Tu-Uyen did not have a place to voice these sentiments until they found Project Ngoc. Project Ngoc offered a sanctioned safe space on university campus grounds for the establishment of an autonomous political site. This became an alternative zone for the members to politically express themselves without judgment from the community. UCI was far enough away from the eyes of their family members and the community, which meant that they could explore their independent and critical thinking without fear of judgment. Project Ngoc allowed students a place to act outside of the normal roles that were expected of them from the family and community. Furthermore, it allowed 1.5 generation participants, who also experienced these issues, the chance to organize on behalf of Vietnamese refugees. This opportunity amplified their own unique voices and increased the visibility of refugee experiences to the American public, giving the Vietnamese community more credibility within the United States.

There were two phases to the organization's active years: the years that Project Ngoc members actively volunteered in refugee camps and the following years when volunteers were no longer allowed to visit the camps. The bulk of the organization's activism was during this first phase, from 1987 to 1994.

In this initial phase, the group's main motives were to advocate and lobby for human rights, raise awareness about Southeast Asian refugees, and generate funds for student volunteers to go on fact-finding missions to refugee camps in the Philippines, Thailand, and Hong Kong.[52] Project Ngoc volunteers investigated and reported on the conditions of the refugee camps, creating documentation that would later serve as

[52] "Guide to the Project Ngoc Records MS.SEA.016," *Online Archive of California*, http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt8z09p8pd/.

important archives on Vietnamese refugee history.[53] Copies of these reports were then sent to each member of the U.S. Congress at the time.[54] Additionally, the funded volunteers were given significant positions in the camps such as educators who could teach and translate English for the refugees.[55]

Out of the three interviewees for this thesis, Professor Tu-Uyen was the only one who had the chance to volunteer2020 cen in the camps during her time with Project Ngoc. She was able to volunteer in the last year before refugee resettlement services were closed and volunteers were barred from visiting. During this time, the closing of refugee camps in 1994 brought a new urgency to Project Ngoc. Collaborating with Boat People SOS, an organization that operated rescue missions of Vietnamese boat people, Project Ngoc volunteers were sent to refugee camps to interview its occupants.[56] Some volunteers were given the responsibility of screening refugees, interviewing them to determine if they would qualify for asylum.[57] This issue was crucial as refugee screening was a policy enacted by the international body governing refugees, the Intergovernmental Committee on Migration (ICM), to lower the number of refugees seeking asylum.[58] Since there were refugees of all ages, Professor Tu-Uyen's responsibility at the time was to screen those who were unaccompanied minors. These individuals, normally youth under the age of 18, were in the camps without their family members. Many of these children were under ten years

[53] Project Ngoc, *Project Ngoc Flyer*, 1993, *Online Archive of California*, 1993, http://www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb267nb0sm/?brand=oac4.
[54] "Guide to the Project Ngoc Records MS.SEA.016".
[55] Ibid.
[56] Tu-Uyen Nguyen, Interviewed by Kassandra Tong, Fullerton, CA, April 30, 2012.
[57] Ibid.
[58] "IOM History," International Organization for Migration, September 30, 2014, https://www.iom.int/iom-history.
At the time of Southeast Asian resettlement, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) was known as the Intergovernmental Committee of Migration (ICM).

old. As Professor Tu-Uyen recalled, "Some of these kids, they would leave with their family members, but [lose] their parents or their family members along the journey."[59] Such losses reveal the many layers of refugee trauma experienced by Vietnamese Americans in the diaspora. Professor Tu-Uyen's experience as a volunteer demonstrate that daughters can become mothers in a way that extends beyond their immediate family as they care for individuals unrelated to them by blood.

Volunteers also helped to foster a sense of community for the refugees, providing relief in the face of the many hardships in the camps. They offered direct services, such as building libraries and also organized recreational activities and festival celebrations for cultural events like *Tet*.[60]

Professor Tu-Uyen was able to document stories she heard from the refugees about their journeys. This helped to transmit and amplify the stories of refugees at the local, national, and international level. Similarly, many other volunteers brought back documentation on refugee camp conditions and the struggles and resilience of Vietnamese in the camps. Volunteers returned with artifacts and ephemera such as images of the camps and artwork/poetry from the refugees themselves about their journeys and experiences.[61] These materials were extremely remarkable because they presented the raw emotions that refugees felt during their time in the camps, which was rarely shown to the public at the time. One of the main goals of the organization was raising public awareness of Vietnamese refugees through programs such as photo exhibitions, art shows, vigils, press conferences,

[59] Tu-Uyen Nguyen, Interviewed by Kassandra Tong, Fullerton, CA, April 30, 2012.
[60] "Guide to the Project Ngoc Records MS.SEA.016".
[61] Project Ngoc, *Boat People: A Cry for Freedom*, 1990, *Online Archive of California*, 1990, http://www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb6779p0z4/?brand=oac4.

concerts and fundraising events.[62] Despite a regular turnover of students over the course of ten years, the organization continued to grow through its active members and the reputation and connections it established in the Vietnamese American community.

Second Phase of Project Ngoc's Active Years

Following the end of their volunteer services in refugee camps, Project Ngoc continued to be extremely impactful by raising Vietnamese visibility. Noticing the lack of political recognition for Vietnamese refugees in Orange County, Project Ngoc realized that there was a need to educate the Vietnamese community on techniques to empower each other. As a result, the organization's members shifted their work to promote increased awareness about the refugee population already in Orange County. After 1994, Project Ngoc turned its primary focus away from aiding refugees overseas to empowering the local Vietnamese community nearby to UCI to assert citizenship rights. The group's main goal expanded to advocating for humanitarian rights for Vietnamese people both inside and outside of the United States.[63] By order of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, refugee camps were to close and those who had not completed the relocation process had to repatriate.[64] They began organizing fundraising events, such as Walk-a-Thons, dances, and art exhibitions to honor the refugees Project Ngoc aided and to remind the Vietnamese community in Orange County of their connected lives as refugees.[65]

[62] Ibid.
[63] "Guide to the Project Ngoc Records MS.SEA.016".
[64] Ibid.
[65] Mai-Phuong Nguyen, Interviewed by Lotusa Chan, Irvine, CA, March 02, 2012.

Project Ngoc also continued to publicize the mistreatment of Vietnamese refugees in other regions of the world. This allowed Dr. Mai-Phuong, Cô Nicole, and Professor Tu-Uyen an opportunity to lead and support the Vietnamese community in Orange County. They made former refugees who resided in California aware that the struggles they faced as refugees were still ongoing. By joining Project Ngoc, Cô Nicole was able to prove to herself that as a daughter and as an advocate, she was a valuable resource to the Vietnamese community in Orange County. For example, during Cô Nicole's time as chair of Project Ngoc from 1996 to 1997, Vietnamese refugees were being mistreated in sweatshops across Thailand.[66] However, the American populace was unaware of the mistreatment of Vietnamese refugees overseas. In an effort to help bring the issue to light, Cô Nicole performed multiple actions for Project Ngoc to protest Nike's exploitation of Vietnamese sweatshop workers in Thailand. The goal was to boycott and ban the use of all Thai products in retaliation for the exploitation of Vietnamese workers in Thai sweatshops. This was a sensitive issue as many Vietnamese refugees heavily relied on Thai products to make authentic homemade Vietnamese cuisine.[67] Widely used household products in the Vietnamese community, such as fish sauce, originated from Thai factories. Nevertheless, once the community realized their own positionality and good fortunes as citizens of the United States, a "free" country, they began to support the cause. The Vietnamese American community in Orange County also helped because they felt a feeling of mutual responsibility for current refugees. During this experience, Cô Nicole used her positionality as a daughter of the Vietnamese community and her kinship connections to remind the

[66] Nicole Nguyen, Interviewed by Malessa Tem, Yorba Linda, CA, February 26, 2012.
[67] Ibid.

community that while it had been twenty years after the war, the community still lacked political rights, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. Furthermore, these difficulties began when she was a child and continued, even though she had now grown up to become an adult.[68] She explained and gave context to these issues for the first generation by discussing with them her personal experience with the situation. This in turn enabled them to understand the perspectives of people like themselves.[69] However, despite their various efforts in advocating for Vietnamese refugees within Project Ngoc, some of these women's efforts were not always accepted, nor acknowledged, by their families. As Cô Nicole recalls, she would be extremely busy every day running actions for Project Ngoc, however, her family never attended nor gave her their support as they did not want to be reminded of the traumas that they experienced.[70]

In 1997, Project Ngoc members disbanded the organization after a productive ten-year run upon assessing that most Vietnamese refugees had been resettled or repatriated towards the end of the 1990s. Many members of the Orange County Vietnamese American community were upset regarding this decision. They felt that the organization was very influential and could have used their power to help support Vietnamese Americans in Orange County further. Community members saw the impact that student activists could make in the local and global Vietnamese community.[71] They wanted to use it to continue other projects that involved uplifting Vietnamese visibility and representation. However, it was Cô Nicole who made the decision as the last chair of Project Ngoc to disband the

[68] Nicole Nguyen, Interviewed by Christina Nguyen, Tustin, CA, February 23, 2020.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Gasman and Nguyen, "Cultural Identity and Allegiance Among Vietnamese Students and Their Organizations at the University of California, Irvine: 1980–1990," 18.

organization. Although she was cognizant of the power Project Ngoc had in mobilizing people, she was also aware that the original purpose of Project Ngoc, which was to serve refugees, had been fulfilled.[72] She stated that if Project Ngoc were to continue, it would have needed to be re-named and re-branded since its mission of serving refugees ended.[73]

The Legacy of Project Ngoc

Overall, Project Ngoc became a generative space for Dr. Mai-Phuong, Cô Nicole, and Professor Tu-Uyen to engage in political leadership as individuals and as daughters of the Vietnamese American community. These women redefined what "loyalty" meant to the Vietnamese diaspora, particularly along the lines of gendered roles and expectations. They demonstrated that there were other ways of being that could involve both their own personal interests and the community's interests – ways that allow them to stay true to themselves and to their emerging political conscience. Their leadership in Project Ngoc prepared them for their careers and future activism.

Upon leaving the organization, each of these women took the motivation and knowledge they cultivated from Project Ngoc to embark on even bigger campaigns and movements. The urge to do more and give back continued – an urge that was planted during their time with Project Ngoc. Thus, following their graduation from UCI, these women began to lead separate journeys towards their respective careers. However, what they each had in common was their transformative journey with Project Ngoc and the lessons they learned in organizing, leading, and caring for their community.

[72] Nicole Nguyen, Interviewed by Christina Nguyen, Tustin, CA, February 23, 2020.
[73] Nicole Nguyen, Interviewed by Malessa Tem, Yorba Linda, CA, February 26, 2012.

For example, Project Ngoc influenced Dr. Mai-Phuong's involvement as a public health advocate for the community. As part of her lifelong commitment to healthcare equity, Dr. Mai-Phuong went on to earn a medical degree and is running her own health business, Karuna Healthcare Consultants, Inc which focuses on ensuring limited English-speaking patients get culturally competent healthcare. Dr. Mai-Phuong also found time to support her community and continues to advocate for Vietnamese American political representation. During the 2020 Census, Dr. Mai-Phuong became an active member of the Complete Count Committee (CCC) for the Vietnamese community in Orange County. She played a crucial role as the primary networker for finding influential Vietnamese speakers for community events.

Project Ngoc also forged a path for Professor Tu-Uyen's involvement with community health, wellness, and education. Professor Tu-Uyen is currently an associate professor of Asian American Studies at California State University, Fullerton. In recent years, she conducted research on how to reduce health disparities among medically underserved communities within Orange County. Her research focuses around community-based patient navigation, which gives community members the same level of authority as the researcher. Researchers analyze the nuances among cultures by interacting with the community in a participatory manner. Professor Tu-Uyen's participatory action research agenda is grounded in a social justice framework that can be linked to her formative years as a Project Ngoc activist.

Like Dr. Mai-Phuong, Cô Nicole also has a career within the medical field. She is certified in Project Management and works remotely as a Program Manager for Kaiser Permanente. In addition to Kaiser, Cô Nicole spends part of her workdays with another

organization called Project MotiVATe, based in Orange County, California. Project MotiVATe's main objective is to mentor at-risk Vietnamese American youth in order to develop early academic, cultural, and social leadership skills. The organization also offers opportunities for Vietnamese American youths to become more civically engaged within their community, encouraging teenagers to understand their heritage by educating them on how to service their community in Little Saigon. Cô Nicole has continued the work that Project Ngoc started regarding education programs for refugee children. She is inspired by the reminder of her own refugee status and by the education programs Project Ngoc helped to fund. This is a key factor because it encourages her to continue the framework that Project Ngoc has set in place to support Vietnamese refugees in the United States.

Being activists allowed these women to have more freedom and power beyond traditional Vietnamese gender roles**.** Rather than subsuming themselves within the family project, they sought to pursue political organizing outside of "traditional" Vietnamese family spaces, such as demonstrating on college campuses or hosting candlelight vigils at Westminster City Hall. They experienced pressures to focus solely on the family by marrying, bearing children, and channeling all their labors towards economic support. Instead of restoring and replicating traditional cultural customs that were problematic, they shifted their political work to empower the community while also creating space to include women's individual empowerment**.** They moved past established traditional gender values regarding patriarchal dominance and used political activism to address the community's refugee traumas. In doing so, they redefined the relationship of obedient daughters to the overall community. Daughters could serve and speak for the community by being true to themselves and their own passions.

These women also constructed a new form of generative political leadership through encouraging youth to become community leaders themselves. For example, Cô Nicole has a deep connection with the at-risk teenagers that Project MotiVATe serves. She feels the need to provide guidance and aid for these youth who do not have support networks in or outside of the home. She became involved in the community after her involvement with Project Ngoc empowered her to become a political leader and connect with Vietnamese history and people. Cô Nicole wholeheartedly embraces her Vietnamese identity as an adult, something she lacked when she was younger. She seeks to provide this knowledge to the next generation of Vietnamese Americans, particularly at-risk teens, in hopes of them becoming community leaders like her.[74]

As community leaders, each of these women are cultural educators who support a holistic approach to assisting the community. They focus on individual, familial, and community well-being**.** These 1.5-generation women depict that there can be a balance between the conflicting gender expectations that their families, communities, and the larger Vietnamese society might have and what they want for themselves. They show that women's political empowerment can exist alongside community political empowerment**.** Expectations of familial piety limited Vietnamese women's agency, confining them to traditional gender roles. However, these women illustrate that it is possible to challenge and transform this familial piety by taking initiative within the community and channeling their own personal passions. They developed an alternative model for political action that includes the needs of individuals and is mindful of the community they serve. As leaders, they move with the community. They demonstrate to the 1.5 generation that one can be

[74] Nicole Nguyen, Interviewed by Christina Nguyen, Tustin, CA, February 23, 2020.

both Vietnamese and American. In fact, it is through understanding one's identity that one can improve their community.

Conclusion

All in all, the experiences of Dr. Mai-Phuong, Cô Nicole, and Professor Tu-Uyen suggest that 1.5 generation immigrants do not need to pick a side between their identities as Vietnamese and as American. The traumas experienced by refugee communities may be passed down from generation to generation, but these 1.5 women demonstrate that this cycle can be broken and altered. In doing so, they provide a new model of gendered leadership. Project Ngoc offered them an alternative political space away from the constant surveillance of the family and home community. This allowed them to engage in advocacy labor for the community. By using the university space, a sanctioned site due to its educational mission, these women were able to express their beliefs as individuals while redefining the gendered expectations for women to be obedient daughters.

As a result of refugee trauma, controlling daughters was seen as central to maintaining family cohesion and stability. The Vietnamese refugee community tended to pressure daughters to pick sides between being American or being Vietnamese. This impossible choice meant that one cannot be both Vietnamese "and" American. During the post-Vietnam era, these expectations of gendered obedience and cultural maintenance became seen as "tradition" that should not be challenged. As the Vietnamese community grew in Orange County, individuals like Dr. Mai-Phuong, Cô Nicole, and Professor Tu-Uyen exposed and knocked down these cultural pillars, because they were counterproductive for the Vietnamese community in the U.S. and those still suffering the condition of being

refugees. These women's lives demonstrated that gendered cultural values were not set in stone and that there are different ways of being beyond the "us or them" dichotomy of identity choices. Furthermore, they retained their identity as daughters of the community, even as they became community leaders and advocates. They demonstrated that for the 1.5 generation, it was possible to be both Vietnamese and American, which meant being able to make your own decisions without being constrained by expectations like the maintenance of familial piety. In fact, it was through understanding and claiming one's identity that allowed them the means to improve the community.

Part of a new generation of political activists, these women helped to transform the political agenda of the Vietnamese community in Orange County. They demonstrated that daughters and caretakers of the family can bring forth a new generation of people who are politically active and community focused. These women's experiences as political leaders modeled a form of political reproduction. They both cared for the overall community, defined expansively to include the Vietnamese diaspora outside of the U.S., and nurtured younger generations to think for themselves and take political action.

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