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(Re)producing Refugees: Early Chinese-Vietnamese Encounters with Social Services

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(Re)producing Refugees: Early Chinese-Vietnamese Encounters with Social Services

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by

Tiffany Wang-Su Tran

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

(Re)producing Refugees: Early Chinese-Vietnamese

Encounters with Social Services

by

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Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Kyungwon Hong, Chair

The United States nation-state's approach to refugee resettlement created a situation of social service dependency for Chinese-Vietnamese migrants. This study focuses on the children of Chinese-Vietnamese refugees who acted as intermediaries between the state and their supposedly less linguistically and socially fluent elders. Through the narratives of my interviewees it is clear that the ubiquity of social services led to their early parentification in a social welfare system that did not provide linguistically and culturally responsive services. This meant that at times multiple families depended on my interviewees to secure housing, food, healthcare, and even citizenship statuses. Despite efforts to narrate themselves at upwardly mobile model minority figures, my interviewees' efforts to redefine success are driven by the precarity that they experienced as children.

This thesis of Tiffany Wang-Su Tran is approved.

Victor Bascara

Keith L. Camacho

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Kyungwon Hong, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2019

For Popo, Ah Mah and Baba.

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do justice to the complexities, hardships, and incredible resilience within our community. Chinese-Vietnamese stories deserve a place within academia, and this project would not have been possible without all of you.

PREFACE

I'd like to situate my own positionality within this study as the impetus for why and how this study came to be. I came to this study after years of living in the working-class areas of San Gabriel Valley and not quite understanding how and why so many of my Chinese and Chinese-Vietnamese peers grew up utilizing free lunch and social services. Despite our newly minted degrees from highly-ranked universities throughout the nation, many of us came home to families that were still on welfare. In many cases, our college educations were not enough to pull our families of four or more out of welfare.

I find it important to be transparent about my positionality within this study because China has been a colonial power in Vietnam for centuries, and it is only fair that I acknowledge my family's positionality within Vietnam. I am the daughter of a Chinese (Fujianese) refugee from Hải Phòng, Vietnam and a survivor of China's cultural revolution from Meixian, China (Hakka). Both of my maternal grandparents were survivors of famine who raised their children during China's Cultural Revolution. My paternal grandfather immigrated to Vietnam in the 1940s from Xiamen, China to look for work as a truck driver. My paternal grandmother was born and raised in Hà Nội, Vietnam. Her family immigrated to Vietnam generations before her, also from Xiamen, China, for business ventures. Although my paternal grandmother grew up as the daughter of an affluent business owner, they lost their fortunes during the French occupation in Vietnam. This left my father to also grow up poor like my mother and her family. After the US war in Vietnam officially ended 1975, my father's family intended on staying in Vietnam; however, after hearing rumors about the persecution of Vietnam's Chinese residents by the Vietnamese government, my father's family fled to China. After living in China for about a year, my father and his older brother were the first to leave their family. My father, my uncle, my

great-uncle and his family left China by boat to Hong Kong. My father spent one year in a refugee camp in Hong Kong and three months in Bataan, Philippines before arriving in Los Angeles in 1980. The rest of my father's family immigrated to Los Angeles from China five years later after my father and my uncle became naturalized citizens. During those five years, my father earned his associate's degree in auto mechanics. Shortly after, my father went back to China to marry my mother and sponsored her to join him in the US. My parents moved their family of five from Silver Lake, Los Angeles to Monterey Park for the available housing and proximity to the Chinese and Chinese-Vietnamese communities in the San Gabriel Valley in 1994.

I grew up in a single-income household with both of my parents and two older sisters. By the time my parents had children they were able to raise their family without public assistance. My father worked as an auto mechanic until the 2008 recession. At the time I was just about to enter high school, one older sister was about to start community college, and my oldest sister was about to start her junior year as an undergraduate. The first time my family ever utilized social services after the recession hit and my father became unemployed, was when I was introduced to Medi-Cal, free and reduced lunches, financial aid, and fee waivers. Up until then, my sisters and I had the privilege of having our basic needs met by our parents while we were growing up. Although my sisters and I had to provide translations for our parents long before utilizing social services, we became much more skilled at navigating this system after 2008, when we had to fill out forms and speak with case managers regularly. These experiences led me to question the ubiquity of social services in the lives of Chinese-Vietnamese refugee families and how these families navigated life in the United States. This study will demonstrate the skillfulness that Chinese-Vietnamese community took in navigating social services.

INTRODUCTION

"It's even really hard for my friends to understand, even my friends who are Asian American don't understand why my aunts and uncles are still on social services. They'll be like, 'Why can't they ask their children? You know this idea of they've been in the states for thirty-something years. Why aren't they better off?' So I think it's really hard for me to talk to other people unless they're like children of refugees or immigrants who had similar experiences."-Julie

"My dad in a way would yell at me to say 'we cannot pay x amount of money, it is not possible' and then he would just yell at me about the finances of it, and I was thinking to myself we can't haggle public housing."- Ren

Whether it was waiting in line at the food bank, learning how to use coupons to maximize food stamps, or explaining how section 8 housing could not be bargained for, Julie, Sam, Ren, Joann, Aiden, and Maria, all children of ethnic Chinese refugees from Vietnam, have all had close relationships with social services. Many times their families relied on them as intermediaries with the state to secure basic survival needs such as food, housing, and healthcare. As I spoke with all of them about how they came to take on these roles, and why they were subjected to such tasks before other children their age were even allowed to walk home from school on their own, it became clear to me that if they did not do it, then no one would.

The government agencies and private organizations entrusted with the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of refugees from Southeast Asia were not equipped to continually provide social services past the several years that were budgeted for initial resettlement. Furthermore, the

homogenization of the Chinese-Vietnamese population as Vietnamese refugees overlooked the language barriers that many of the Cantonese speaking or non-Vietnamese speaking refugees faced. Many social service agencies were not set up to address ethnic Chinese refugees from Southeast Asia. Services were typically translated into dominant Southeast Asian languages, such as Vietnamese, Khmer, and Lao. Agencies were unable to address the nuances in Chinese dialects that many of these ethnic Chinese migrants spoke. Even after the "Southeast Asian refugee crisis" ended, Chinese-Vietnamese families continued to utilize many of the social services that were set up for Mandarin-speaking Chinese migrants. Therefore, my interviewees had no choice but to translate, research, and explain services to their families at young ages because, like many children of immigrants and refugees, they were recognized as the more linguistically and socially fluent members of their families. Thus, my research questions are as follows: How have early encounters with social services affected Chinese-Vietnamese Americans? What roles do the children of Chinese-Vietnamese refugees facilitate between their families and the state? How has welfare reform affected the utilization of welfare services within the Chinese-Vietnamese community?

I argue that not only were my interviewees parentified through the process of navigating social services for their families, but that the precarity that my interviewees and their families experienced has pressured them to narrate themselves as upwardly mobile model minority figures as a way to protect themselves from these precarities.[1] These acquired traits of hypercompetency and self-sufficiency can sometimes sustain neoliberal discourses of the "good refugee" and the model minority. However, through their interviews, I find that my interviewees

[1] Gabriel P. Kuperminc, Gregory J. Jurkovic, and Sean Casey, "Relation of Filial Responsibility to the Personal and Social Adjustment of Latino Adolescents from Immigrant Families," Journal of Family Psychology 23, no. 1 (February 2009): 14–22, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0014064, 14.

have more complex and contradictory narratives that both uphold and challenge such neoliberal discourses as inherently impossible and disciplining. My interviewees frame themselves and their elders as competent and skillful as they navigate a social welfare system that is callous and inadequate and that upholds the good/bad refugee/immigrant binary.

This thesis aims to address the state's inability to serve migrant communities through the social welfare system. Furthermore, this research also critically interrogates the resettlement process for hundreds of thousands of refugees from Southeast Asia. It is important that this study centers the Chinese-Vietnamese community because they have existed within Vietnamese American and Chinese American scholarship; however, ethnic Chinese refugees from Southeast Asia are rarely disaggregated from other ethnic groups within these texts. Relatedly, services have not been set up to address this community. The Chinese-Vietnamese American community deserves more attention as they grapple with how their narratives relate to larger narratives of Chinese American and Vietnamese American community conditions in order to address systematic discrepancies from the state. Although the arguments made in this thesis are not all specific to the Chinese-Vietnamese American community, the experiences of my interviewees as navigators of multiple bureaucratic systems and cultural identities are central to the arguments. The systematic barriers that my interviewees encountered have resulted from a long history of multiple migrations, exclusionary policies, and a lineage of white benevolence. Together, this thesis may inform future social welfare policies and strategies used to address the immigration "crisis."

Historical Context

Chinese-Vietnamese migrants have had a unique experience of being marginalized and minoritized within Vietnam because of international relations between China and Vietnam.

These relations came to a climax during the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, which pushed ethnic Chinese migrants to migrate out of Vietnam during the second wave of the Southeast Asian refugee crisis. The US's response to the Southeast Asian refugee crisis was to establish social service programs for refugees in part to serve the US's desires to look like humanitarian heroes during the late Cold War era. However, in the 1990s, as attention waned and neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility became dominant, these social services were drastically cut, leaving families struggling to navigate increasingly demanding welfare bureaucracies. Linda Liebenberg, Michael Ungar, and Janice Ikeda explain, "the expectations of neo-liberal theory are of individualized responsibility and self-governance where individuals are seen as self-directing and autonomous, irrespective of context."[2] Such neoliberal discourses created a shift in responsibility from the government onto the individual. The 1990s is exactly when my interviewees were growing up, and they were children being called upon to help navigate these complex bureaucracies.

This brief historical background will provide context for the expulsion of the Chinese from Vietnam by detailing events leading up to 1979. Tensions between China and Vietnam led to border disputes that resulted in China's invasion of Vietnam during the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979.[3] The mass exodus of ethnic Chinese migrants from Vietnam that followed greatly contributed to the "second wave" of refugees from Southeast Asia. What is known as present-day Vietnam had shifting borders for centuries, each change punctuated by events in centuries of historical colonization and imperialism.[4] Before the 1900s, voluntary migration flowed between

[2] Linda Liebenberg, Michael Ungar, and Janice Ikeda, "Neo-Liberalism and Responsibilisation in the Discourse of Social ServiceWorkers," British Journal of Social Work 45 (October 1, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct172.

[3] Monica M. Trieu, *Identity Construction Among Chinese-Vietnamese Americans* (El Paso: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2009), 23.

[4] Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, *The Asian American Achievement Paradox*, 2015, 27.

China and Vietnam. Natural disasters, political instability in China, and an increase in economic opportunities increased migration from China to Vietnam in the early 1900s.[5] When Vietnam gained more independence from France in the 1950s, the Diem regime in Vietnam started pressuring more ethnic Chinese to change their ethnic identification from Chinese to Vietnamese and to declare Vietnamese citizenship. Major restrictions were also placed on economic activities, travel, and education for the Chinese who did not follow the orders of the Diem regime.[6] After the Sino-Vietnamese War, which lasted from February 17th to March 16th in 1979, more restrictions were used to push the Chinese out of Vietnam. The war came out of strife between China and Vietnam when China showed outward support for the Khmer Rouge regime and dissent towards the Vietnamese Government's persecution of the ethnic Chinese. The war began with China sending over 80,000 troops into Vietnam. After six weeks of fighting, the Chinese decided to pull back their forces. Further restrictions by the Vietnamese against the Chinese in Vietnam resulted in a large outflow of Chinese "boat people" from Vietnam.[7] The refugees who left on boats were referred to as "boat people" due to their methods of fleeing on small fishing boats. According to Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, approximately 400,000 refugees left Vietnam between 1978 and 1982 as part of the "second wave" of refugees. Among this 400,000, approximately half of the "boat people" were Sino-Vietnamese or ethnic Chinese refugees from Vietnam.[8] Lee and Zhou explain, "Disproportionately Sino-Vietnamese, the boat

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[5] Trieu, *Identity Construction,* 17.

[6] Ibid, 18-19.

[7] David Stout, "The Last Time China Got Into a Fight With Vietnam, It Was a Disaster," *Time*, May 15, 2014, accessed May 25, 2016, http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html.

[8] Lee and Zhou, *Achievement Paradox*, 27.

people were victims of anti-Chinese sentiment fueled by the China-Vietnam border conflict in 1979, and they became prime targets of the nationalization of private businesses."[9] Trieu wrote that the boat people sparked an 'international refugee crisis' because of their method of leaving.[10] Luise Druke wrote that asylum and resettlement countries did not want to take the responsibility of housing refugees amidst the international crisis; however, the United States, being responsible for much of the distress, took in the most refugees from the 1970s to 1990s. Druke wrote, "…it became clear that the developed world was determined from the start to not have to deal with the refugees permanently. The United States, with a special responsibility toward Indochina, took the lead."[11] Due to the international crisis sparked by the second wave of refugees from Vietnam, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) called the 1979 Geneva Conference. This conference led to the creation of The Orderly Departure Program (ODP) of 1979, which was commissioned as an attempt to organize the stream of refugees departing from Vietnam. Under ODP, neighboring countries were to offer asylum to boat people instead of turning away boats, which is what they previously did.

As the Southeast Asian 'refugee crisis' of the 1970s and 1980s created large humanitarian efforts internationally, social welfare systems needed to grow to accommodate the large influx of refugees. Approximately 51% of Southeast Asian refugees have been resettled in the US.[12] Government and non-government agencies, and religious organizations poured

[9] Ibid.

[10] Trieu, *Identity Construction,* 21.

[11] Luise Drüke, Innovations in Refugee Protection: A Compendium of UNHCR's 60 Years ; Including Case Studies on IT Communities, Vietnamese Boatpeople, Chilean Exile and Namibian Repatriation, 2013, http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1952772, 176.

[12] Linda W. Gordon, *7: Southeast Asian Refugee Migration to the United States*, vol. 5, 1987, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2050-411X.1987.tb00959.x, 153.

humanitarian efforts into resettling Southeast Asian families all throughout the world. Betty Barton argues, "From the time the refugee makes his escape to the country of first asylum, where he is placed in an authorized refugee camp or processing center, until his eventual resettlement in the United States, a refugee has encountered no less than eleven international and national agencies."[13] In order to manage the hundred of thousands of refugees that arrived in the US, government agencies were tasked with find resources and services for the refugees. Yến Lê Espiritu writes, "Soon after Vietnamese refugees arrived in the United States in 1975, the federal government, in collaboration with social scientists, initiated a series of needs assessment surveys to generate knowledge on what was widely touted as a 'refugee resettlement crisis.'" The US Department of Health and Human Services oversaw The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) which administered the Refugee Resettlement Program. The Refugee Resettlement program was the primary source of cash assistance, medical assistance, and social services to refugees.[14] The Refugee Resettlement Program provided cash and medical assistance for those deemed as "needy refugees" to state and other agencies that were then reimbursed by the federal government. Additionally, the Refugee Act of 1980 also administered federal funds to state governments for refugee resettlement programs.[15] According to Eric Tang:

> President Carter "turned his administration's attention to a massive Southeast Asian refugee resettlement program, which he hoped would legitimize the United States as a leader in a new global humanitarian cause and simultaneously obscure its ongoing

[13] Betty Barton et al., *Indochinese Refugee Resettlement (Juneau: House Research Agency, Alaska State Legislature,* 1981), 31.

[14] Barton et al., *Indochinese Refugee Resettlement*, 32.

[15] Ibid, 35.

relationship with Pol Pot. For Carter, the figure of the refugee proved useful in answering the political quandaries of U.S. foreign policy.[16]

Providing asylum and resettlement services to Southeast Asian refugees was a political move by the US in order to repair its image during the Cold War. However, recipients of public social services greatly saw a change or complete halt of their services after the 1996 series of welfare reforms with the implementation of The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) under president Clinton.

As neoliberal discourses of self-sufficiency and the privatization of social services were becoming popularized in the 1990s, this left many Southeast Asian families still dependent on public assistance with an increasingly difficult social welfare system to navigate. According to Tang, PRWORA was "unmistakably punitive."[17] PRWORA created mandatory work programs for workers to work thirty hours without pay in order to receive benefits, limited welfare services to a total of five years, and created changes to the federal regulations of Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF). Providing refugees with social services was meant to temporarily assist newly arrived refugees until they were able to become self-sufficient; however the 1990 U.S. Census showed that although 10 percent of all Americans were officially living under the national poverty line, 47 percent of Cambodians, 66 percent of Hmong, 67 percent of Laotians, and 34 percent of Vietnamese officially lived in poverty.[18] Therefore, my interviewees were growing up in the 1990s during a difficult social climate that celebrated personal responsibility, and

[16] Eric Tang, *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto*, 2015, 36.

[17] Tang, *Unsettled,* 82.

[18] Lynn Fujiwara, Mothers without Citizenship: Asian Immigrant Families and the Consequences of Welfare Reform (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvii.

popularized blaming the poor for being poor. However, my interviewees and their elders still seemed to skillfully maneuver their way through attaining social services despite the cut backs.

Terms

According to the UNHCR, "A *refugee* is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group."[19] Depending on where and how people are displaced, this broad description of a refugee allows for the UNHCR and nation-states to define who gets to be a refugee. Therefore, the refugee is a political figure, and when supported by different bureaucratic systems a displaced person can either receive an abundance of services and support or none at all. The term refugee has been redefined by national and international policies on multiple accounts to purposefully include or exclude certain groups of displaced persons by different regimes of power. Tang wrote, "At times the refugee category serves as a justification for warfare itself because extreme violence attends the delivery of 'freedom' and 'human rights' to those said to be stripped of such supposedly universal attributes."[20] It is important to bring attention to how refugees are recognized because the social services that my interviewees and their families have received were dependent on their refugee statuses upon resettlement. As inadequate as the services were in all the cases presented, there are many other displaced groups that have not been granted asylum and or access to services specifically for recognized refugees.[21] Therefore, I use the term refugee, to recognize that as displaced people recognized as

[19] "What Is a Refugee? Definition and Meaning | USA for UNHCR," accessed March 24, 2019, https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/.
[20] Tang, *Unsettled,* 29.
[21] Susan Gzesh Susan Gzesh, "Central Americans and Asylum Policy in the Reagan Era," migrationpolicy.org, April 1, 2006, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-americans-and-asylum-policy-reagan-era.

refugees my interviewees and their families had access to specific and limited services because the UNHCR determined that "boat people" qualified as refugees. Additionally, the US nation-state also honored the refugee status of the boat people and provided them with services because of guilt and white benevolence.

My interviewees learned to skillfully navigate a bureaucratic welfare system that was and still is largely influenced by *neoliberal* discourses. In this thesis I do not solely define neoliberalism as the privatization of social services and the shift in responsibility of public welfare from the state to the individual, but I also apply Grace Hong's definition of neoliberalism. Hong defines neoliberalism as "an epistemological structure of disavowal, a means of claiming that racial and gendered violences are things of the past."[22] Hong continues by explaining that "neoliberalism affirms certain modes of gendered, racialized, and sexualized life, as to disavow its exacerbated production of premature death."[23] Jodi Melamed explains:

> Neoliberal multiculturalism has responded to the reconfiguration of state powers and boundaries under global capitalism by portraying the United States as an ostensibly multicultural democracy and the model for the entire world, but in a way that has posited neoliberal restructuring across the globe to be the key to a postracist world of freedom and opportunity.[24]

These definitions of neoliberalism contextualize my thesis by demonstrating that racialized, gendered, ableist, and classist discourses are masked as self-sufficiency and multiculturalism in order for the state and other capitalist entities to make profits. In this case, neoliberalism is a

[22] Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference*, 2015, 7.

[23] Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal,* 7.

[24] Jodi Melamed, Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism (U of Minnesota Press, n.d.), xxi.

violent system that determines standards of success for my interviewees; however, my interviewees are able to re-define success outside of neoliberalism. I also employ Tang's description of the *welfare state* as the time when "welfare regulation took a punitive turn in 1996" with the implementation of PRWORA.[25] Following neoliberal discourse, the state placed the responsibility of providing for its poor on the poor, withdrew benefits, and privatized social services. Besides the restructuring of the welfare system into the welfare state, neoliberalism also created shame and blame on poor communities for being poor, which forced my interviewees to participate in a system that concurrently celebrated their self-sufficiency, yet also invalidated and disciplined their hypercompetence. This neoliberal discourse informs the unattainable model minority and good/bad refugee binary that my interviewees struggle to attain and define. As Aihwa Ong explained:

> In the 1960s, the term model minority was coined to refer to Japanese Americans who despite their wartime incarceration in camps, managed to gain upward mobility… The media soon broadened the term to include Chinese Americans and Asian subjects came to be perceived as minorities who raised themselves up by their bootstraps. Asian Americans were stereotyped as embodying the human capital of diligence, docility, self-sufficiency, and productivity.[26]

Not only is the figure of the model minority detrimental to all Asian Americans, but the neoliberal model minority is also used to demonize a homogenized Black underclass.[27] The model minority is a neoliberal construct because it celebrates a system of violence that values

[25] Tang, *Unsettled,* 16.
[26] Aihwa Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 77.

[27] Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding,* 77.

Asian Americans solely for their productivity, while simultaneously upholding difference for the sake of productivity and capitalistic gains. Lê Espiritu introduces the figure of the "good refugee," a figure that "enables a potent narrative of America(ns) rescuing and caring for Vietnam's 'runaways,' which powerfully remakes the case for the rightness of the U.S. war in Vietnam."[28] Therefore, although welfare recipients are racialized and stereotyped as lazy and deviant, all of my interviewees have achieved relative success because of their abilities to be self-sufficient and hypercompetent. Thus, my interviewees are able to uphold and challenge the model minority myth as inherently impossible and disciplining.

Gaps in Literature

Existing literature that have studied Southeast Asian refugees have approached the community with damage-centered research[29]. Eve Tuck defines damage-centered research as pathologizing, "in which the oppression singularly defines a community."[30] When studying Southeast Asian refugees, scholars have often framed these communities as needy, traumatized and recipients of the "gift of freedom."[31] Mimi Thi Nguyen explained the gift of freedom as a "world shaping concept describing struggles aimed at freeing peoples from unenlightened forms of social organization through fields of power and violence."[32] Lê Espiritu argues that American society has kept a monolithic narrative about the Vietnamese community where the Vietnamese have captivated American imaginaries as solely being refugees. Vietnamese Americans seem to

[28]Yen Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*, 2014, http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1711008, 7.

[29] Eve Tuck, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 409–28, https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15, 413.

[30] Tuck, "Suspending Damage," 413.
[31] Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*, 2012, 3.

[32] Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom,* 3.

be inherently connected to this narrative of war and salvation despite the groups that have arrived in the United States post-Southeast Asian refugee crisis. The growing literature within the field of critical refugee studies suggests that work produced about war, imperialism, and militarism do not have to center the refugee as the figure of U.S. and Western benevolence.

Although the majority of the work that has been published about Southeast Asian refugees have focused on upholding the "good refugee" narrative, scholars working within critical refugee studies aim to to frame refugees "not as an object of investigation but rather as a paradigm 'whose function [is] to establish and make intelligible a wider set of problems."[33] Rather than treating refugees as agential subjects and producers of knowledge, refugees have historically been treated as objects of study as if amounts of trauma and suffering can be empirically measured with depression and anxiety scales. For decades even studies produced within ethnic studies have not been critical enough of constructing "Vietnamese immigrants as needing tutelage in this country."[34] Within Asian American Studies (AAS), scholars have emphasized resistance and resilience, but in AAS the emphasis is on organizing or social movements as examples of resilience. Although strength-based theory is taught and implemented in clinical practice, many social welfare scholars still engage in damage-centered research, and few studies focus on resilience when writing about Southeast Asian communities.[35] My study argues that these 1.5 and 2nd generation Chinese-Vietnamese Americans create alternative

[33] Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts,* 10.

[34] Nguyên-Vo Thu-Huong, "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?," Amerasia Journal 31, no. 2 (2005), 161.

[35] Tayyab Rashid and Robert F. Ostermann, "Strength-Based Assessment in Clinical Practice," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 65, no. 5 (2009): 488–98, https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20595.

identities and narratives that fit but also depart from neoliberal ideologies through their interaction with the social welfare system.

Additionally, scholarship around parentification has come from the traditional social sciences such as psychology and communication studies, which have not been critical of the neoliberalization of the social welfare system, which created the need for children to be parentified. These texts approach parentification as just a normal aspect to growing up for immigrant children because being poor should already accustom them to being hyper competent. According to Gabriel P. Kuperminc, Gregory J. Jurkovic, and Sean Casey, "some immigrant parents rely on their children more than is culturally prescribed and developmentally appropriate, failing to provide adequate support because of migration-relatedtresses, such as separation from family members, discrimination, social isolation, and underemployment."[36] Although it is true that some groups of immigrant parents may rely on their children more than others, the fault lands on the state to provide and determine what is "culturally appropriate" instead of blaming the parents for needing help. Prior scholarship have also narrated refugees and the children of refugees as success stories and model minorities who have overcome great hardship due to perseverance and hard work.[37] This thesis aims to bring light to how structures of mass violence have created circumstances for refugees to struggle to survive, but also strategize around and within such structures.

Methodology

Participants were recruited through a flyer that indicated the topic of the study and the initial screening questions. The flyer was posted on my Facebook page and emailed to two

[36] Kuperminc et al., "Relation of Filial Responsibility," 14.
[37] Phuong Ly, "Saying 'Yes' To U.S. Success; Vietnamese Refugee At Top of Her Class," *The Washington Post*, 2000, DC.1.

listservs in May 2018. These listservs are for progressive grassroots organizations, VietUnity-Los Angeles (VU-LA) and Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED). VU-LA is a "collective of Viet identified activists and organizers" committed to global and local struggles against violence for peace, justice, and self-determination.[38] CCED is a multi-ethnic, intergenerational, grassroots organization that was founded in 2012 when residents, activists, workers, youth and business owners organized against the building of Wal-Mart is Los Angeles' Chinatown.[39] CCED advocates for affordable housing, quality education, open recreational spaces, and a green environment and Chinatown and its surrounding areas.[40] I am not aware of any organizations specifically organized around Chinese-Vietnamese identities; therefore, I chose Viet-Unity and CCED because they were likely to have members who identified as both Chinese, Vietnamese, and Chinese-Vietnamese. Because of my social network through Facebook and members with access to the listserv, my recruitment pool was limited to progressive millennials, which is one of the limitations of this study. The flyer was then re-shared or re-posted on multiple public and personal pages. After flyers were sent and posted I received emails from individuals who either came across my original postings or were referred to the study by a peer. Screening calls were scheduled with 10 potential participants by mid-June 2018. After the screenings, 6 participants qualified and agreed to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted in-person or were conducted online through webcam from late-June to mid-July. Both were audio-recorded. Interviews lasted approximately two hours with each participant. All participants agreed to follow-up interviews or questions as needed. All have at least one parent

[38] "VietUnity-LA | Blog," accessed May 11, 2019, http://vietunity-la.org/blog.html.

[39] "About Us," Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, accessed May 11, 2019, http://www.ccedla.org/about-us.html.

[40] Ibid.

who is an ethnic Chinese refugee from Vietnam. All participants grew up in households that utilized public assistance. Of the six participants, four are second generation Chinese-Vietnamese Americans, and 2 are 1.5 generation Chinese-Vietnamese American. Five participants currently reside in California, and 1 resides in New York. My participants are:

Sam (they/them/their)

Sam identifies as Chinese-Vietnamese American and an Angeleno. Sam was born in Los Angeles, California and raised in the Elysian Valley of Northeast Los Angeles. Sam currently resides in Atwater. Sam's father is Chinese (Teochew) born and raised in Vietnam. Sam's mother is Vietnamese and was born and raised in Vietnam. Sam's parents were both raised in Châu Đốc, Vietnam. Sam has an older sister who was born in Vietnam. Sam's family arrived in Los Angeles in 1981. Sam's father works at the post office and Sam's mother used to also work at the post office, but now works as a real estate agent. Sam holds a masters in social welfare. Sam currently works as a licensed clinical social worker.

Ren (he/him/his)

Ren identifies as Asian American and Chinese American. Ren was born in Hainan, China and immigrated to the US at four-years-old after his father became a naturalized citizen. Ren spent most of his childhood in Brooklyn, New York and currently resides in Manhattan, New York. Ren's father is Chinese and was born in Cambodia. As a teenager, Ren's father migrated to Saigon, Vietnam. Ren's mother is Chinese from Hainan, China. Ren's father arrived in the US in the 1980s. Ren described his father's employment history as holding odd jobs. His father has once been a hotel bellhop and waiter. Ren's mother worked as a seamstress in the garment industry. Ren holds a bachelor's degree in finance. Ren works in finance as a quantitative analyst.

Aiden (he/him/his)

Aiden identifies as Sino-Vietnamese. Aiden was born in Saigon Vietnam and immigrated to the US at five-years-old to Orange County. After a year Aiden went back to Saigon with his parents and older sister. At the age of eight, Aiden immigrated back to the US with his parents and sister and settled in Rosemead, California. Both of Aiden's parents are Chinese who were born and raised in Vietnam. Aiden's father was born in northern Vietnam and Aiden's mother was born in southern Vietnam. Aiden's immediate family all immigrated to the US together in the early 2000s to reunite with family who had already been resettled in southern California. Aiden's father works as at grocery stores, and Aiden's mother works at bakeries and restaurants. Aiden is currently finishing his undergraduate degree in design at a university in northern California.

Julie (she/her/hers)

Julie identifies as Chinese-Vietnamese American. Julie was born in Oakland, California. Julie's father is Vietnamese and was born and raised in Sài Gòn, Vietnam. Julie's mother is Chinese (Hainanese) and was born and raised in Sài Gòn, Vietnam. Julie's mother arrived in Oakland in 1980 and Julie's father arrived in Oakland in 1981. Julie was raised in Alameda, California and currently resides in Alameda. Julie has a younger brother. Julie's father works as a Vietnamese language interpreter and data analyst for the city and county. Julie's mother worked a data entry job at a stock exchange until the early 2000s. Julie holds a masters degree in social justice and equity in education. Julie works as a tutor at a local community college and runs an online platform for Southeast Asian diasporic narratives.

Joann (she/her/hers/they)

Joann identifies as Chinese-Vietnamese American. Joann was born in Oakland, California. Joann's father and mother are both Chinese (from Beihai, China) and were born and raised in Cát

Bà, Vietnam. Joann's parents arrived in the US separately in the 1980s. Joann has an older brother and a younger brother. Joann's father works as a server in a restaurant. Joann's mother worked as a seamstress in the garment industry for many years and now works as a baker at a bakery. Joann holds a masters degree in higher education and organizational change. Joann works as a regional program coordinator overseeing several high schools and community colleges in the Bay Area and works in media design for a university system.

Maria (she/her/hers)

Maria identifies as Vietnamese American and Chinese-Vietnamese American. Maria was born in Tucson, Arizona. Both of Maria's parents were born and raised in southern Vietnam. Maria's father is specifically from Đà Nẵng, Vietnam. Maria's mother in Chinese (Cantonese). Maria's mother arrived in the US in the late 1970s in New York and she is unsure about when her father arrived in the US. Maria's mother worked as an assembly line worker assembling vents for air systems, wrapping newspaper at a newspaper plant, and sold food to coworkers. Maria did not recall any formal employment for her father. Maria holds a bachelor's degree in psychology and business and administration. Maria now works in marketing as part of a regional marketing team for a restaurant group.

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter 1, I discuss the ubiquity of social services, the specificities of different programs that were available, and how the social welfare system operated within Southeast Asian refugee communities. I argue that the neoliberalization of the welfare state created a system that provides inadequate social services to the poor, yet it punishes them for "overearning" when they try to subsidize their services. The lack of support from the state forces the parentification of my interviewees in the process of acting as lay social workers and

intermediaries between the state and their elders. I then explain how social services for refugees were meant to provide temporary assistance until the refugees became self-sufficient; however, the system was not set up in a way to help them achieve such economic independence. In fact, many of my interviewees have family members who decades after resettlement are still utilizing public assistance.

In Chapter 2, I critique the model minority as inherently unattainable. I provide examples of the good/bad refugee and undeserving/deserving poor binaries to support the argument that the model minority is a neoliberal construct used to violently celebrate difference by pitting poor communities of color against one another. I argue that despite the pressures of meeting demands to attain success from their elders, my interviewees are able to redefine success by strategically navigating the welfare system. Due to the precarity that my interviewees and their families faced, they observe neoliberal discourses of hyper-competence and self-sufficiency in order to protect themselves from instability. I examine how while school is often a site for the model minority to excel, school was also a place where difference and disparity were highlighted for my interviewees.

In the conclusion, I discuss my findings and summarize my analysis. I also discuss the implications of my research for future research projects, policy, and social welfare practices.

CHAPTER ONE

"I think it was really important that we had welfare... Yeah, I think it helped [my parents to] be able to go to school so that they could get more sustainable careers, more jobs later on. Yeah, I think it helped them be able to buy a home 8 years into being here."- Sam

"I think the intention was always good. I think that the execution around these social programs and policies are often inadequate."- Julie

Sam and Julie found that social services were helpful for their families to build a life in the US. Sam recognized that welfare was the reason why their parents were able to finish their formal education and pursue professional jobs. Julie revealed that although she found the assistance helpful, they really could have been implemented better. My interviewees definitely appreciated social services, but navigating services for their families was still a difficult process, and as Julie said, such social policies and services were "often inadequate." One of the US nation-state's approaches to Southeast Asian refugee resettlement was to temporarily provide refugees with exclusive and limited social services. As Sam and Julie demonstrate, the state's intentions were well-meaning, but also meant for refugees to eventually become self-sufficient after several years of utilizing social services. However, rather than providing refugees with linguistically and culturally responsive resources, the state created a system where Chinese-Vietnamese migrants became dependent on the state. The ubiquity of social services within the Chinese-Vietnamese community created a social service dependency, while it simultaneously failed to provide adequate resources to the Chinese-Vietnamese community. The migrants received inadequate trainings, employment, and language resources, and lacked guidance in navigating the bureaucracy related to social services. This resulted in the parentification of their

supposedly more linguistically and socially fluent, English-speaking children to navigate the resources for their elders. Through their interviews, my interviewees demonstrate how as the children of Chinese-Vietnamese refugees they navigated an inadequate and disciplining social welfare system. Language barriers and punitive welfare policies led my interviewees to skillfully maneuver various welfare services at young ages.

Receiving social services may not play a crucial role for a majority of children residing in the U.S., but for my interviewees, social services were instrumental to their family's survival after resettlement. In 2015, 52.2 million people (approximately 21.3% of the U.S. population) participated in monthly government assistance programs.[41] Although a majority of people in the U.S. were not receiving welfare, social services played a crucial role in the lives of the children of Chinese-Vietnamese refugees who received social services for most if not all of their childhoods. By September 2003, 80% of the adults who had exhausted their CalWorks in Orange County were Vietnamese.[42] In response to federal welfare reform, CalWorks was established in 1998 as a program for "able adults who receive cash grants to work to maintain their eligibility, and limit recipients to five years of benefits over their lifetime."[43] Therefore, Lynn Fujiwara writes that public assistance was "inextricably tied to the resettlement process."[44] The Refugee Act of 1980 enabled refugees from Southeast Asia to receive a higher rate of assistance than any

[41] US Census Bureau, "21.3% of US Participates in Government Assistance Programs Each Month," The United States Census Bureau, accessed March 26, 2019, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-97.html.

[42] Scott Martell and Mai Tran, "More Vietnamese Immigrants Reaching End of Welfare Benefits," Los Angeles Times, November 1, 2003, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-nov-01-me-viet1-story.html.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Fujiwara, *Mothers Without Citizenship,* xviii.

previous group of immigrants.[45] Ong writes, "Refugee provisions were time-limited, initially for up to three years from the date of arrival; but by 1987, Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) was cut back to two years."[46] Services meant specifically for refugees became increasingly limited as funds ran low, and the state continued to push refugees to work towards financial independence. Tang further explains this process:

> They were also told that welfare programs --specifically, cash assistance and food stamps--were only stopgap measures, and that refugees were expected to become economically self-sufficient soon after their resettlement. However, as their years in the United States wore on (and as federally funded resettlement assistance programs either dried up or were discontinued), chronic unemployment among Bronx Cambodians persisted, and most of the refugees continued to subsist in the welfare state well into the 1990s.[47]

Although services were meant to be temporary, the state did not set up structures that would adequately train refugees to become self-sufficient. As Tang mentioned, most Bronx Cambodian refugees stayed on welfare years past the intended dissolution of resettlement services. Like the Khmer from Tang's discussion, my interviewees also grew up navigating services for their elders in the 1990s. When refugee assistance came to an end many refugees went on to other forms of public assistance such as food stamps and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)[48]. While writing about the process of children becoming language brokers in their immigrant families, Vikki Katz writes, "The increasing bureaucratization of modern life certainly requires immigrant families to navigate ever-increasing requirements, documentation, and formal

[45] Ong, *Buddha is Hiding,* 83.

[46] Ibid, 87.
[47] Tang, *Unsettled,* 77.

[48] "Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) - Overview," ASPE, March 14, 2016, https://aspe.hhs.gov/aid-families-dependent-children-afdc-and-temporary-assistance-needy-families-tanf-overview-0.

procedures to address their everyday needs."[49] Therefore, even after refugee assistance ended and the social welfare system became even more strict and limited due to neoliberal policies in the 1990s such as PRWORA and TANF, my interviewees as children of refugees were still expected to navigate increasingly difficult social welfare related bureaucracies. The ubiquity of social services and the parentification of children serving as informal translators, caseworkers, and social workers were clear in the stories told by my interviewees.

The resources provided by the state proved to be inadequate when many refugees like the parents of my interviewees had to work several jobs in order to supplement their welfare benefits. Reliance on social services was very common among refugee communities. Tang explains that approximately two-thirds of Cambodian refugees continued to receive assistance and welfare checks even after drastic cuts to welfare were made by the federal government. According to Tang, in order to "To supplement these meager benefits, Cambodians found work in New Jersey factories; as home-based garment workers; or by selling food to fellow residents in the park." Tang reveals that these jobs often went unreported in fear of losing benefits and "overearning."[50] Similar to the Bronx Cambodians written about by Tang, Maria's mother also worked multiple jobs to supplement the social services her family was received. Maria recalled, "My mom worked three different jobs to provide for me and my brothers. We were very poor." Although Maria's mother worked multiple jobs, she was still unable to pull her family out of poverty. The welfare reform of the 1990s created workfare programs which required recipients to work a certain amount of hours in order to receive assistance.[51] In addition, PRWORA

[49] Vikki Katz, "Children as Brokers of Their Immigrant Families' Health-Care Connections," Social Problems 61, no. 2 (May 1, 2014): 194–215, https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2014.12026, 195.
[50] Katz, "Children as Brokers," 195.

[51] Tang, *Unsettled,* 96.

implemented in 1996 set a time limit on how long individuals could receive welfare benefits, removed noncitizens from key programs, and tightened verification requirements. However, recipients could have benefits halted or reduced if they did not work enough or worked too much.[52] These punitive measures made it very difficult for recipients because they were not given enough services to keep afloat, but required workfare hours made it nearly impossible for them to supplement their income with additional employment. Therefore, many refugee families either underreported earned wages or became very skilled at navigating multiple social services. Ong explains:

> Over time, the refugees became familiar with a constellation of public assistance offices and programs and their complex and sometimes contradictory rules, by which what is given with one hand is taken away by another, and assistance with getting a job is undermined by deductions in public assistance.[53]

In addition to the punitive measures taken by the social welfare system, refugees were expected to achieve financial independence and self-reliance through employment. Refugee training programs were meant to prepare refugees for low-wage jobs as janitors, hotel maids, and domestic workers.[54] Families had to submit to informal, underpaid, gray market, and vulnerable work to survive. Ong illustrates, "Social services in general were promised on a technology for making judgments based on information gathered, and regulating clients according to some calculus of limits to entitlement and the autonomy of individuals and of families."[55] My interviewees' parents were also subject to working low-wage jobs that ranged from working as

[52] Tang, *Unsettled*, 7.
[53] Ong, *Buddha is Hiding,* 123.

[54] Ibid, 83.

[55] Ibid, 129.

pastry chefs at bakeries, servers at restaurants, seamstresses at garment manufacturers to bellboys at hotels. Lê Espiritu points out:

> Because the word 'refugee' conjures up images of a desperate people fleeing a desperate country, Vietnamese workers are presumed to be naturally suited and even grateful to work in boring, repetitive, monotonous, low-paying, and insecure jobs. Such tidy conclusions dispense with questions about U.S. power structures that continue to consign a significant number of Vietnamese Americans to unstable, minimum-wage employment, welfare-dependency, and participation in the informal economy years after their arrival."[56]

Refugees were told by social workers to apply for livable-wage jobs that did not exist or that were completely mismatched with their skill sets.[57] Therefore, the state sent contradicting messages to the refugees that they were expected to pull themselves and their families out of poverty, but they should not expect to be set up to do so.

Beyond initial resettlement processes, The Refugee Resettlement Program (RRP) also had a responsibility to provide linguistically and culturally responsive services to communities. The RRP was initiated to provide initial programs and "acculturation"[58] services to newly resettled refugees. Services received while the RRP was in effect and after were inadequate for the Chinese-Vietnamese community. According to Barton, one of the goals of Social Adjustment Services implemented through the RRP was to acculturate the refugees. Barton writes, "Beyond a refugee's immediate service needs are those necessary for more substantive acculturation. Social adjustment services represented a continuum of care during a refugee's initial years of resettlement. Less immediate needs included instruction in driver's training and the requirements for U.S. citizenship."[59] Social adjustment services were available to refugees for the purposes of

[56] Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts,* 7.
[57] Ibid.

[58] Barton et al., *Indochinese Refugee Resettlement*, 48.

[59] Ibid.

acculturation, but the basic needs of interpreting were not provided, which made the program less effective. Although learning to drive and learning about US citizenship are important processes for new refugees to learn, more immediate skills like learning how to search for employment, how to apply for different welfare benefits, and how the educational system worked would have been more helpful. Therefore, this meant that my interviewees, who were the children of Chinese-Vietnamese refugees, took a crucial role in providing such social and linguistic skills.

Although many of my interviewees and their family members eventually became very skilled at navigating social service bureaucracies, these tasks were often difficult without proper resources provided by the state. Aside from navigating bureaucratic complexity, Joann's experiences with social services also meant handling racist, xenophobic, and condescending attitudes towards her mother and herself. Social services workers often spoke to Joann and her mother in ways that made them feel belittled and unseen. Joann said:

> I think that since there weren't a lot of Asian American workers there, I would get frustrated when I [went] to the DPSS office because of the way they talk[ed] to my mom, especially since she doesn't really understand English so they talk to her in a very condescending way. Sometimes they intentionally speak really slow[ly]. It's like you know you're trying to talk to her like she's stupid and she doesn't understand it which is why I'm here to help her translate. So I think growing up, especially my mom, she had really negative and hostile experiences with DPSS but she knew that we needed these external resources to survive so for her she just bit her tongue every time she walked into a room and had to deal with a very hostile worker. They don't really have translators there. For me it's like when I walk into the office at least I hear Spanish speaking folks who are able to help Spanish speaking families; however, you know because the Asian American community is so diverse they don't really have an interpreter, and if they do it's for someone who speaks Mandarin. You know my family speaks Cantonese so there's always that divide.

Not only did language barriers play a role in the ostracization of attaining social services, but the treatment by workers further belittled folks who were already stigmatized for seeking services. Joann and her mother's experiences with social services point to several shortcomings of the

social welfare system. Chinese-Vietnamese communities often speak both Vietnamese and Cantonese due to their history of migration from China to Vietnam. Historically, the largest group of Chinese immigrants to Vietnam immigrated from the Cantonese speaking province of Guangdong because of their proximity to the coast, expertise in banking and trading, and their extreme economic turmoil during China's Cultural Revolution.[60] Khánh Trần explains that the five largest Chinese speech groups in South Vietnam in descending order are Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka, Fukien, and Hainanese.[61] All five of the dialects originate from provinces along the southeast coast of China, and a majority of my interviewees are from families that migrated to Vietnam from these regions.[62] Although Mandarin is China's official recognized dialect, many diasporic Chinese refugees from Southeast Asia actually speak Cantonese. Therefore, when a social service agency neglects their Cantonese speaking population it can cause feelings of exclusion, especially in an area with a high density of Southeast Asian refugees. Additionally, this example of social service workers speaking slowly to Joann and her mother and undermining their intelligence was a way for social workers to regulate their clients. Ong writes:

> Biopolitical decisions about welfare clients, low-skilled workers, good parents, and ethnic models are influenced by historically branded Black images of weakness, indolence, and primitivity. As part of the political unconscious, such thinking influences the conduct of social experts and social workers who seek to regulate the behavior of minoritized populations considered less civilized than society at large.[63]

[60] Khánh Trần, The Ethnic Chinese and Economic Development in Vietnam (Institute of Southeast Asian, 1993), 30.

[61] Ibid, 31.

[62] See Appendix 1

[63] Ong, *Buddha is Hiding,* 13.

Clients came to learn that in order to receive services they had to act properly, which to Joann's mother meant biting her tongue and taking whatever hostile treatment the workers gave her. The state allows its agents to treat its poor as disposable because the poor would continue to depend on the state for services. Ong added that the primary role of the social workers was in Ken Moffatt's terms, "to aid 'in the management of the poor and helping to control the dangerous classes,' separating the normal from the abnormal, and the good from the bad refugee, the responsible from the 'welfare cheat.'"[64]

★	Sam
★	Ren
★	Aiden
★	Julia
☆	Joann
☆	Maria

[64] Ibid, 126.

Figure 1: A map of Chinese-Vietnamese migrations from China to Vietnam by interviewee.

The difficulty in attaining services was seen as a way of weeding out "welfare cheats" who were often racialized as women of color. Therefore, not only is Joann and her mother's treatment an example of the state's negligence in providing adequate linguistically and culturally responsive services, but the workers' hostility were also a means to categorize the so-called good refugee from the bad refugee and deter the bad refugee from utilizing services. If Joann and her mother did not regulate their behavior by biting their tongues, and if they were to react in "bad refugee" behavior then they could have been weeded out from receiving services by state agents. The lack of proper staffing with adequate language training and proper language capabilities to serve the community seeking services is a form of negligence, and it used as a regulatory measure to force communities to cope with the circumstances given to them and to enforce conforming behavior through the threat of not receiving life-sustaining social support.

While the social welfare system is already difficult to navigate for English-speaking families, for non-English-speaking families, the system puts added pressure on the children in non-English speaking families to act as translators and code-switchers. Frustrations with how services were delivered and miscommunication in attaining services were also points of tension for Ren and his father. When Ren described the process of applying to public housing Ren said, "My dad in a way would yell at me to say 'we cannot pay x amount of money, it is not possible' and then he would just yell at me about the finances of it, and I was thinking to myself we can't haggle public housing." In this way, Ren had to act as a mediator between the state and his father. As someone who was not a trained expert in public housing, Ren had to explain to his father that public housing prices were nonnegotiable and how the whole system worked. This situation put pressure on Ren not only as the translator but also as a proxy of the housing

authority to inform his dad that this was something he could not change. I argue that this is also a process of separating the good refugees from the bad refugees. When children fail to code switch between the state and their elders, the blame is not placed on the state but is rather placed on the children for not been skilled or competent enough. However, as increasingly difficult as these tasks became for my interviewees, Chinese-Vietnamese refugees continued to rely on social services.

As refugees and new Asian immigrants continued to rely on services, they became targeted as the undeserving poor who were presumed to be taking advantage of welfare services while the state was trying to cut back on public assistance through neoliberalization. When explaining the neoliberalization of the social welfare system during the 1990s, Fujiwara writes, "The increasing use of public assistance by more recent Asian immigrant and refugee groups galvanized the anti-immigrant campaign, provoking accusations against Asian immigrants and refugees for welfare dependency and failure to assimilate to the American way of life and work."[65] As such, my interviewees were left to navigate the increasingly limited social welfare system without proper language resources because they were also expected to "assimilate." Social services were so normalized for my interviewees that they were all able to share vivid memories about their early encounters with the social welfare system in the 1990s and early 2000s. For many of my interviewees, their memories of welfare were closely tied to food. When Sam was growing up, their family received an earlier version of Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)[66] for around five years. Additionally, Sam reveals:

[65] Fujiwara, *Mothers Without Citizenship,* xvii.

[66] The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides Federal grants to States for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age five who are found to be at nutritional risk.

> My sister remembers being in line with my mom to get food at food banks. All I remember from that [time] is I remember being hungry and we needed to leave somewhere and I was complaining, and they were like okay just eat this stick of butter. So I was eating it because you know you got all the dairy you wanted.

Sam's early memories of public assistance were not unique to just their family. Other interviewees also recalled waiting in line at the food bank and specifically consuming eating dairy products. In fact, "government cheese" became popularized as a welfare staple in the 1980s.[67] When asked about his early memories receiving welfare, Aiden remembered dairy products. Aiden recalled, "I remember a lot of milk because in Vietnam milk is hard to get so there would always be a jug of milk in my fridge even when there's no cereal." Similarly, Maria shared early memories of lining up at the food bank:

> We would always go with my aunt to the food bank, and it was always really crappy food. I remember always not liking what we brought home. Like you know it was all those white label cans that you know there's no brands at all. I think there were eggs that came out of a white box that you would just add water to and then cook it. All this powdery food. Lots of non-perishable and no branding whatsoever so me and my brothers would not know. Lots of cereal, and juices...Then my aunt had a baby so sometimes at the food bank we'd see her getting formula and diapers, so that wasn't too bad. We definitely qualified for free lunch and it was probably the best meal we had that day because my mom didn't have time to cook for us. Then when we'd get home we'd just microwave some hot dogs and eat cereal.

For Aiden, using food stamps was so routine that he did not realize that not everyone purchased groceries with food stamps. Aiden recalled:

> I basically grew up being on EBT or CalFresh, Medical, and stuff like that...I thought that was kind of the 'norm,' but then it was in high school or middle school that I kind of realized that most people don't have this. People pay their groceries with card or cash type of things, but for me, I just grew up thinking EBT was the norm.

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[67] Bobbi Dempsey, "The Tyranny and the Comfort of Government Cheese," TASTE (blog), August 21, 2018, https://www.tastecooking.com/tyranny-comfort-government-cheese/.

Social services were also very present in Joann's immediate and extended family. Joann shared that her paternal grandparents still utilize CalFresh and CalWorks and receive Section 8 housing stipends, while Joann's immediate family spent many years utilizing Medi-Cal, food stamps, CalWorks, and public housing at different points throughout her childhood. Joann's immediate family used these different services from before she was born until around when Joann graduated from college. Joann's family stopped utilizing social services because her mom started working again. However, Julie was still heavily exposed to services because she maneuvered the social welfare system for her extended family. Julie's parents were the first members in both her mother and her father's extended family to live in a dual income household. Julie's mom was the first in her family to have a disposable income and discontinue the use of social services. Julie recalled, "Growing up, a lot of my aunts and uncles on my mom's side were on welfare, and a lot of them still are. I remember standing in line at the food bank with my grandmother and some of my aunts. We would also collect cans." For all my interviewees, social services played an important role in providing food to their families.

Aside from the ubiquity of social services usage, another trend among all my interviewees was the immense forced responsibility they had at a young age, because of how their family's survival depended on them. To borrow from Sam who used the term "parentified" when describing their sister growing up, all of my interviewees were "parentified" in order to help their family navigate social services and other important decisions. Scholars have defined parentification as when children "often engage in such tasks as caring for siblings, managing the household, earning income, translating for parents, and mediating family conflict."[68] My interviewees had to maneuver complex bureaucratic systems for their families to receive social

[68] Kuperminc et al., "Relation of Filial Responsibility," 14.

services. According to Tang, the children of Cambodian refugees "spoke of their families' sanctioning by city welfare programs and of being pulled from school and other activities to accompany their parents to welfare offices to serve as interpreters and advocates."[69] Similarly, my interviewees helped their family members attain services by providing translations and other forms of assistance. Julie vividly recalled her experiences:

> I got taken out of school a lot when I was young because my grandmother was very ill on my mom's side, and because nobody in my family could take time off of work, or they didn't speak English. My dad would have to pick me up from school and drop me off at the hospital. I would just have to stay there in case the doctor had any questions, [or] in case they had to translate something. I very vividly remember my grandmother had pneumonia, and usually at six or seven years old you don't know what the hell pneumonia is, but I remember the doctor had no choice but to take me out of the room, show me an x-ray, and he had to explain in like seven-year-old language what pneumonia was, and then I had to translate that into Vietnamese and Cantonese for my grandmother and aunts who were in the room. That memory always stuck with me because even then I knew that this was not something that most other kids had to do. I mean none of my classmates ever got taken out of class to go to the hospital, right? I knew that it must have been really strange for the doctor to have to rely on a seven-year-old to know everything rather than an adult in the room. Technically, I was the adult in the room which was crazy. For some reason, that's the memory that always sticks with me.

At seven years old Julie was pulled out of school just like the children of Cambodian refugees to serve as an informal interpreter, case manager, and social worker for her family members. Julie's family relied heavily on her translation skills and knowledge of different systems for not only social but also medical services, which was crucial for her grandmother's health condition. Just like Joann and Ren, who translated for their family members, Julie was forced to act as an intermediary between the state and her family because the state was unable to provide resources in Chinese or Vietnamese. As Vikki Katz explains, "Limited familiarity with English and the

[69] Tang, *Unsettled,* 81.

vagaries of the U.S. medical system can further challenge the quality of immigrants' communication with health-care providers, even when they do manage to access care."[70]

Julie's knowledge of how to combine her various skills was essential to her family's survival. As a seven-year-old, Julie was forced to familiarize herself with medical terminology and services that should have been provided by professionally trained, hospital social workers. Julie continued by sharing her thoughts about these experiences:

> So growing up I knew everything about my grandmother like her medical conditions, I knew which offices in Oakland you would go to to get your citizenship test, I knew what hours the passport office was open, I knew where all the food banks in the city were. Like things, I felt like I had to know just because my relatives always came to me and asked. So when the internet came along it was a godsend because then I didn't have to call strangers, and even then you knew there was some shame associated with going to the food bank.

At a young age Julie already knew that utilizing public assistance was meant to be shameful and degrading because as demonstrated previously, state agencies pushed the message that reliance on public assistance meant that the refugees failed to assimilate and become self-sufficient. Julie's comments clearly reflect the lack of accountability that the social welfare system provided to refugee families, but they also show that the social welfare system is complex and challenging. Julie was knowledgeable and skilled in being able to navigate complex systems for her family.

Aiden recalls similar pressures of dependence from family members:

> [Ever] since we came here to recently, we've been using EBT. I'm not sure if my parents are using it now. They told me that because my sister and I aren't living with them anymore they don't qualify anymore. I don't think that's accurate. I think they just don't know like the language and the renewal of things. I think they just don't know it was changed to CalFresh. That's why I need to talk to them about this stuff over the summer when I go home.

[70] Katz, "Children as Brokers," 194.

Even after Aiden moved away from home for college he still felt responsible for ensuring that his parents were fed. Aiden was so accustomed to his family relying on him for their services that he knew he needed to continue performing such duties for his parents. Like Julie, Aiden also provided interpretation for his family, even when it came to matters beyond social services. Aiden recalled:

> I definitely had to translate a lot of documents, especially MediCal...Translating that, translating paperwork for CalFresh or EBT, a lot of times just kind of like what to send or what's the update on that. Other minor things that are not social services are phone bills or car insurance stuff that they need help translating, So a lot of the mail stuff that they sent to our place I would usually be the one translating or near my dad asking if he needed help. That was me growing up, I did this at a very young age. For me, I learned about social services at a young age through the paperwork, but I didn't really know what it was until I got older.

The process of parentification for my interviewees included much more than just navigating different social services. For Aiden and the other participants, it also meant that they needed to learn the language around maneuvering everyday responsibilities meant for adults. Julie questioned why the state was unable to provide adequate services, and why as a child she was taken out of school when the rest of her peers did not seem to have the same responsibility. Julie :

> I remember thinking how come I had to be taken out of school? Why didn't the hospital find a Vietnamese interpreter? I mean obviously, they had to exist if my dad was one. But why wasn't there one on call or why couldn't they have a service to call? Also, why weren't forms in Vietnamese or Chinese? A lot of them were in English and that's why you get stuck with a seven-year-old trying to understand this very complicated language for a tax document, you know? Like how am I supposed to know? Why was I in ESL for three years when I clearly out-performed everyone one every test? But because of the policy, even my teachers couldn't get me out of it. It was like that's the way it is and there's nothing they could do.

Julie points out that the state required her to have language skills and other skills far beyond those of normal seven-year-olds, yet she was also simultaneously treated by the state as someone who was deficient, being forced into ESL classes. Her comments show how the state expects the

children of refugees to acquire linguistic, social, and cultural skills needed to perform duties for their families in response to the state's shortcomings, but the state will simultaneously punish these children for not speaking English as their first language.

My interviewees provided much more than helping their families navigate social services; they also help their families navigate essential aspects of their lives, such as health insurance, job applications, school forms, and citizenship forms. Katz writes, "Their brokering efforts serve their families, but also the institutions and providers they interact with. Effectively, children broker to compensate for the limited (or nonexistent) accommodations that institutions make for diverse populations."[71] My interviewees had no choice but to overcompensate for the shortcomings of the state. In Julie's case, her family needed interpreters at hospitals and other service settings so that she would not be forced to temporarily halt her education in order to to provide these services as a child. Sam's older sister also took on similar duties in their family when she "did a bulk of the translating" for their parents. Sam's sister is 6 years older and according to Sam, "She was really parentified, it was everything from like my sister would read *Consumer Reports* and help my dad figure out what car to buy." Maria also recalled that she and her brothers took on a lot of responsibility at a young age. Maria said:

> We've actually been doing forms since we were in the fourth grade. I used to do my own school paperwork to go back to school. I used to forge my dad's signature. *laughs* That's how good we got at it. And throughout high school, I would help with [the] paperwork to go do their U.S, citizenship and then housing paperwork, and for the families who needed assistance, I helped fill out paperwork for mothers with WIC.

In addition to filling out her own school forms as a child, Maria was also expected to assist other families with paperwork. Maria's parents both liked to assist other newly-arrived Vietnamese families with obtaining services; therefore, these acts were not exclusive to her parents because

[71] Ibid, 195.

Maria and her brother were also expected to help the new immigrants with interpreting documents and explaining processes.

For my interviewees and their families, these experiences were not uncommon. The adults had to rely on their children for important life decisions because the social welfare system took advantage of the labor the children learned to provide. The lack of adequate language and culturally responsive services forced my interviewees to act as lay social workers and case managers for their families. The changes in social welfare policy also regulated acceptable behavior in order to determine which refugees would have access to services and which groups would not. In the next chapter, I will discuss how the precarity that my interviewees discussed in Chapter 1 are exactly what my interviewees and their parents are trying to protect themselves from through adhering traits of self-sufficiency and hyper competency. The process of parentification outlined in Chapter 1, has created avenues for my interviewees to redefine success by upholding yet simultaneously challenging neoliberal discourses of the good refugee and model minority.

CHAPTER TWO

"How I see success now is that it still has to do with money. My parents are like oh don't worry be happy, do whatever you want but I still want a good paying job. I recognize that."-Aiden

This chapter highlights the complexity of Chinese-Vietnamese Americans growing up in the US as the ostensible neoliberal model minority navigating the social welfare system. My interviewees strategized to maximize their benefits from the social welfare system that the resettlement process made them so dependent on. However, this did not free them completely from striving to fulfill the unfulfillable standards of success set by the neoliberal model minority myth. Through the process of acting as intermediaries between their families and the state, my interviewees articulated complex and contradictory narratives which both upheld narratives of the good refugee and the model minority and also challenged them as disciplining and inherently impossible to fulfill. Model minority discourse focuses on economic success and the high educational achievements of Asian Americans, but it does not recognize the skillful maneuvering and complex labor of Asian Americans who survive off social services. As they frame their families as competent, my interviewees navigate a social service system that is callous and inadequate. The social services system reproduces the good/bad refugee binary but my interviewees are able to redefine success outside of the neoliberal discourses of hyper competency and self-reliance they are expected to exemplify. The stories shared by my interviewees reflect their attempts to redefine success for themselves by entering fields that are not traditionally sought after. At the same time, they also conform to traditional definitions of success by attaining higher education and striving towards home ownership. Despite pressures to narrate themselves as upwardly mobile model minority figures, my interviewees' definitions of

success are driven by their and their parents' desires to protect themselves from the precarity they experienced in their dependence on social services.

The idea of the model minority has relegated generations of Asian Americans to striving for unachievable standards of productivity, and in turn, created feelings of inadequacy for many of my interviewees. Although the figure of the model minority has been contested countless times in scholarship and activism since its manifestation in the 1960s, it persists within dominant American society. The neoliberal model minority is definitionally unattainable; in other words,the figure only exists because it is unachievable. The myth has persisted because although Asian Americans have contested it, it is also the only mode of visibility in the context of profound erasure. The experiences of Southeast Asians have been homogenized by model minority discourse because of the assumption that they are a part of this group of high-achieving individuals. However, the figure of the model minority can also be understood as a tool of US imperialism used to hold Asian Americans accountable for their productivity and to separate Asian Americans from other communities of color. Victor Bascara explains, "The critique of the model minority can be understood as a critique of U.S. imperialism."[72] The figure of the model minority erases the violence of US imperialism that has been responsible for the displacement and genocide of indigenous and non-white communities all around the world by positing that upward mobility is possible for people of color if only they work hard enough. My interviewees and their families are caught between the violence of US imperialism and intervention in Southeast Asia that impelled their migration, and the false promise presented by model minority discourse, that hyper competency and self-sufficiency can overcome generations of violence. In

[72] Victor Bascara, *Model-Minority Imperialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 4.

so doing, this discourse encourages Asian Americans to separate themselves from other people of color. Bascara writes, "It is an inspirational story, and that capacity to inspire is precisely the problem as the putative success of Asian Americans is used to discipline other minority groups seeking social and economic justice through majoritarian means."[73] Model minority stories are meant to be inspirational for marginalized groups to motivate themselves with stories of success without critically analyzing the different acts of violence that they have endured.

The state's created dependency on social services within the Chinese-Vietnamese community may seem to contradict the neoliberal discourse of self-sufficiency and productivity that is celebrated by the model minority myth, but they are in actuality dependent on each other. The social welfare system is predicated on the valorization of self-sufficiency and productivity. The state's stated long-term goal of providing social services during the resettlement process is for refugees and subsequent generations to become self-sufficient and productive through labor. According to Lynn Fujiwara, "Welfare 'reform' presupposed two things: that welfare use led to dependency and that public assistance programs had created a cycle of poverty. Thus, the rationale went, the elimination of public assistance would push recipients into work and self-sufficiency."[74] However, my interviewees described how the state's elimination public assistance because of the exhaustion of funds did not result in self-sufficiency. Instead, as I argue below, the elimination of special programs created for Southeast Asian refugees led to the systemic parentification of children, or in other words, a situation in which children are required by circumstance to take on responsibilities usually shouldered by adults, within Chinese-Vietnamese families in ways that complicated the model minority stereotype.

[73] Bascara, *Model-Minority Imperialism,* 1.
[74] Fujiwara, *Mothers Without Citizenship,* xix.

My interviewees grew up during an era when the welfare state was transitioning into the neoliberal state, in which drastic cuts to social services were legitimated by discourses of self-reliance and personal responsibility. When President Clinton made his 1992 promise to 'end welfare as we know it,' it was a commitment to overhaul the existing welfare system, which left many Asian Americans in poverty and without adequate assistance. Fujiwara points out that welfare reform came about at a very convenient time when anti-immigrant sentiments were on the rise and social services were under attack for aiding the impoverished in being poor and lazy.[75] Fujiwara writes:

> The growth and visible presence of the Asian American population fed popular constructions of Asian immigrants as unfairly utilizing public benefits instead of relying only on their well-to-do family members-- a commonly recognized 'model minority' construction.[76]

The welfare reform push of the 1990s limited access to social services for many poor communities, disproportionately affecting immigrant women and their children. At the same time, model minority discourse made Asian Americans in this situation invisible. Fujiwara explains:

> The pervasiveness of the 'model minority' myth concealed the depth of poverty among some Asian immigrant and refugee groups, and the increasing need for public assistance among Asian immigrants and refugees, thus veiling the obstacles that these individuals and families negotiate as they operate in a system that defines them as outsiders and undeserving of public support.[77]

The incorporation of Chinese-Vietnamese communities into the model minority myth made it difficult for refugees and their families to argue their case for social services. My interviewees and their families fought hard to navigate the very limited social welfare network as the state

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid,12.
[77] Ibid, xvii.

increasingly became hostile and punitive. Insufficient funds due to changes in the welfare system left many refugee mothers in a very vulnerable state. Fujiwara adds, "The cutting of welfare benefits to immigrant women has had a devastating impact on Asian immigrant women and refugees, particularly within the Southeast Asian community where public assistance is inextricably tied to the resettlement process."[78] Immigrants quickly stopped seeking services because many of the policy changes were miscommunicated to refugee and immigrant communities. My interviewees who were children at the time of these changes faced the impossible situation of having to learn to navigate all these changes immediately.

Welfare reform was also a punitive measure taken by the state against immigrants and refugees who were unable to work. PRWORA tied benefits to working set jobs and hours.[79] According to Fujiwara:

> Regardless of the persistent need and desire for immigrant women's labor in the United States, the welfare and immigration reform act of 1996 sent a clear message: if you become poor and destitute, regardless of how it came about (even if through a job injury), do not expect to rely on public benefits.[80]

Discourses around welfare reform argued that the state already fulfilled its benevolent duties of allowing immigrants and refugees to resettle in the US, and in return, immigrants and refugees were to pay back this debt with their labor. On the one hand, the state demonized some Asian Americans as welfare cheats who did not deserve social welfare services, and on the other, the state popularized Asian Americans as the model minority.

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[78] Ibid.

[79] Audrey Singer, "Welfare Reform and Immigrants," *Brookings* (blog), November 30, 2001, https://www.brookings.edu/research/welfare-reform-and-immigrants/.

[80] Fujiwara, *Mothers Without Citizenship,* xxix.

To complicate this paradigm further, Southeast Asians also had to fit the narrative of the "good refugee," a figure that only further reinforces the model minority.[81] The good refugee figure is a refugee that is grateful for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness regardless of the traumas of war, displacement, and resettlement. Lê Espiritu describes a 'good refugee' as someone who "enthusiastically and uncritically embrace[s] and live[s] the 'American Dream.'"[82] Lê Espiritu writes, "Vietnamese Americans themselves have participated in the making of the 'good refugee' narrative in U.S. mainstream presses," explaining that the good refugee will do everything in their power to express gratitude to their savior.[83] In contrast, a bad refugee is an ungrateful and unproductive member of society, as marked by criminality and resistance to state efforts to manage them. Referencing Liisa Malkki, Ong observes that "imagined nationhood tends to externalize refugees ideologically; thus refugees in general come to be considered morally impure, since they represent 'an aberration of categories, a zone of pollution' in the 'national order of things.'"[84] In order to combat the perception as the "morally impure," refugees and their children are encouraged to must make up for their deficits by having a bootstrap mentality and achieving economic success by any means. In this meritocratic model minority narrative, regardless of the state's wrongdoings, good refugees are expected to be hyper-competent and successful. Lê Espiritu clarifies that "the making of 'good war' narratives requires the production of 'good warriors': the triumphant do-gooders."[85] In order to express gratitude,

[81] Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts,* 6.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Lê Espiritu, "We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose," 340.

[84] Ong, *Buddha is Hiding,* 78.

[85] Lê Espiritu, "We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose," 339

the good refugee is expected to take what is given to them, and to make the best out of it.[86] Good refugees have been given the 'gift of freedom,' what Mimi Thi Nguyen explains as "an insubstantial ruse for what might be called a liberal way of war...invocations of freedom as an intuition, and an at-times blunt instrument, for the disposition of hope and despair, life and death."[87]

To demonstrate this further, Nguyen introduces the story of Madalenna Lai. In The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages, Nguyen describes Lai as a refugee and boat person from Vietnam who offers a "rags-to-riches" story. Nguyen points out that readers must "inquire about the powers that promise her freedom and demand an enduring consciousness of her debt."[88] Although Lai gained "freedom" through her passage to the US, she still found herself in literal and figurative debt. Lai works tirelessly as a single-mother in the beauty industry to provide a life for herself and her four children.[89] Lai refers to the US as a country of freedom and human rights. Lai is used here as an example of the good refugee, a deserving and grateful subject whose labor has been normalized by the state as acceptable behavior. Regardless of the many state violences that my interviewees and their families have navigated, they are expected to create their own success stories, stop utilizing public welfare benefits, and become self-sufficient.

My interviewees navigate between these two positions, oscillating between being grateful to the state, and being critical of the state's actions. In particular, my interviewees

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[86] Ibid, 340.

[87] Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom,* 3.

[88] Ibid, 5.

[89] Ibid, 2.

complicate the good/bad refugee binary by redefining success that in some ways fits the definition of the good refugee and in other ways departs from it.

"Making the best of the situation" means that although the participants were very aware that the resources they were given were not enough, they were still expected to show appreciation. When asked about the assistance Maria and her brothers received from their school when they were in elementary school, Maria shared:

> At that point you're just so grateful for any kind of help. Me and my brothers understood the situation that my mom was in, and I think we're lucky that we were smart enough to realize and see the help that we were getting, and just really grateful for it. That's why if I could help out now like I try. Definitely appreciative of it, and my mom I know was probably just thrilled to have that additional support.

I am not arguing that Maria and my other interviewees are not allowed to show appreciation for any aid that they have received, nor that they are blindly uncritical of the state. Maria and my other interviewees have proven many times that they are critical of many state functionings. For example, as discussed in Chapter 1, my interviewees are critically aware of the shortcomings of the state that placed them in positions of acting as lay social workers for their families. Rather, I am arguing that the making of the good refugee and model minority require that my participants to juggle being critical of state operations and being grateful for all that they have been given. This good refugee narrative is too often explained with rags-to-riches stories centering refugees and other immigrants who have achieved 'success' despite humble beginnings. Lê Espiritu maintains, "The overrepresentation of 'rags-to-riches' refugee stories is misleading since the economic status of many Vietnamese Americans is characterized by unstable, minimum-wage employment, welfare dependency, and participation in the informal economy."[90] As I discussed

[90] Lê Espiritu, "We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose," 343.

in Chapter 1, "unstable, minimum-wage employment" and "welfare dependency" are very present in my interviewees's experiences.. Thus, "rags-to-riches" narratives are not accurate representations of my interviewees who grew up in families exactly like what Espiritu describes. Yet in order to receive services, my participants and their families often had to perform the role of the good refugee. This is because social workers and other aid workers of the social welfare system, who serve as proxies of the state, are able to determine who receives services and who does not, based on how well they performed acceptable, normative behaviors. In this way, their experience elucidates Ong's observation regarding the nature of contemporary power. Ong observes that "sovereign power in this country is diffused through a network of welfare offices, vocational training schools, hospitals, and the workplace, where bureaucrats and their minions mobilize a variety of knowledge that can be used to shape the conduct of subjects…"[91] In order to create "good citizen-subjects," as Ong calls them, this "network" is used to teach, regulate, and instill normative behavior that is accepted and recognized by the state. Normative behaviors were used to distinguish between the undeserving and deserving poor. Ong reveals, "Social services, in general, were premised on a technology for making judgments based on information gathered, and regulating clients according to some calculus of limits to entitlements and the autonomy of individuals and of families."[92] Recipients of social services are subjected to invasive processes such as home-visits and questions interrogating 'legal' marriage status and citizenship. These processes are used to weed out the bad refugees from the good refugees, those who are deemed the undeserving poor from the deserving poor, based on an arbitrary scale that does not and cannot account for displacement, genocide, and trauma.

[91] Ong, *Buddha is Hiding,* 9.

[92] Ibid, 129.

Becoming self-sufficient and independent of state-administered resources meant that my interviewees have had to uphold model minority discourses in order to achieve upward social mobility. Although all of them had to assume roles that made them hypercompetent and knowledgeable during their childhood, they still felt that they had to accomplish many more milestones before achieving success. The model minority myth led my interviewees and their elders to hold them to high expectations, especially because they had proven their skillfulness when navigating social services. erin Khuê Ninh considers the Asian immigrant family as a "production unit-- a sort of cottage industry, for a particular brand of good, capitalist subject: Get your filial child, your doctor/lawyer, your model minority here."[93] Ninh notes that immigrant parents leverage guilt and fear to create feelings of ingratitude and inadequacy.[94] My interviewees' parents' experiences with precarity such as working multiple low-wage jobs may have moved them to push their children toward achieving stability. Joann shared that her mother relayed her high expectations and standards from when Joann was young. Joann recalled:

> My mom always hints at [expectations], especially on the news when they talk about [UC] Berkeley or doctors, that's when she really takes advantage of it. It's she would always hint at it, but when it came from an external source, that's when she would emphasize it the most. She was more of a tiger mom in the sense that she was on me and my brothers' asses about doing well in school, and then when we didn't do well in school she made it very clear that we were a disgrace, and she takes advantage of that, like when we're not doing well in school to really assert her anger towards us to make sure that we do well in school.

Joann's mother used these news stories to her advantage to ensure stability for her children. Although media outlets play big roles in delivering neoliberal discourses of productivity and

[93] Erin Khuê Ninh, *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 2.

[94] Ninh, *Ingratitude, 10.*

self-sufficiency to subjects, much of this rhetoric can be formed and reinforced by lived experiences. Ninh quotes, "The children of post-1965 immigrants have been intravenously injected into the climate of material access and economic restructuring Omatsu describes, in the immediate wake and ongoing mobilization of model minority discourse."[95] The precarity that my interviewees' parents have faced explains why they have reinforced model minority discourses for their own children. Julie explained how her mother had to give up on her dreams of obtaining a higher education in the US. Julie reflected on how obtaining a higher education was very symbolic and important to her mother. Julie recalled, "When I went to UC, she sat in the library and one of the classrooms and told me to take a picture [of her] because that was the closest she'd get to a higher education." The precarity that Julie's mother faced made it difficult for her to pursue her educational goals, and although she never pushed Julie towards a specific profession or school, she still emphasized the importance of education to Julie.

My interviewees were raised to prioritize stability, a standard of living that would break their families' dependency on the welfare system. My interviewees were expected to lead their families out of a state of precarity. Julie received different messages of what was expected of her from different sides of her family. Julie said that her father's side of her family is "now super upper middle class" and her mother's side is " still very low-income." Julie continued:

> My dad's side is very serious about big named schools and big careers. My mom's side is like just go to school and get an education, be independent. My dad's side is like get a job, make a lot of money, buy a big ass house. Very different priorities, and also on my mom's side college is not a given, it's something that a lot of my cousins weren't able to achieve. I'm one of the few who even went to graduate school. My graduation from gradschool was a graduation for my family. On my dad's side, it's like a bunch of his relatives have kids who are doctors and they all go to UCs and some of my cousins were complaining because they got a 2300 on the SATs and they didn't think it was high enough. You know? So it's so different.

[95] Ibid.

Although Julie's mother's side of the family did not emphasize a certain level of education or income like her father's side, they still reinforced education and stability ("be independent"). Julie also spoke about her mother's investment in her education. Julie said:

> We would go to the library every week. My mom made sure that I read a lot, and that any reading assignment we had, she would double the number. She just wanted to make sure that I was learning, and I think she was worried that I wasn't going to 'catch up,' and that I wouldn't have an advantage since I didn't have English as my first language.

Julie's mother did not push Julie into a certain field, but from a young age, her mother recognized that education was a step towards achieving social mobility ("have an advantage"). Julie represents her mother as feeling that she could best support her daughter by encouraging her to read, and Julie credits her mother for her eventual decision to major in history as an undergraduate. Julie's story presents the complexities of the model minority myth. Julie demonstrates how success is articulated differently by different sides of her family. For her mother's side, it seems that "success" is really more about survival and stability.

Like Joann and Julie, Maria also reveals that she learned what was expected of her at a young age However, Maria's story also shows how these expectations were reinforced by influences outside of her family as well. When asked how she learned expectations for herself, Maria answered:

> Oh, definitely from my parents. Mostly my mom, like you have to have this by the time you're this age, and I think movies and television really propelled that. I think like the rich part was from my community [because] at my church, signs you were doing well were that you owned a home, you were driving a BMW, like you carry designer handbags. So that was very Vietnamese community influenced and then you know from my family it was mostly you need to have an education, you need to own a home, you need to have a nice car, and you need to be married with kids.

Indications that Maria was doing well were educational achievements, upward social mobility, and heteropatriarchal reproduction. Maria named her parents, her Vietnamese church community, and media as influences; however, she recognized that her family cared most about Maria having her basic needs covered like housing and employment rather than achieving all the standards outlined by her community. Maria represents the Vietnamese community in Tucson, Arizona as emphasizing extravagance and luxury.

Maria and Julie both grew up understanding what was expected of them; however, neither of them admitted to having achieved all measures of success that they mentioned. As Ninh references, the second-generation often feels pressured to fulfill achievements that have been structurally influenced by larger forces outside of the familial structure. Ninh argues, "What we call intergenerational conflict is at the bottom a conflict of interests, and as such, symptomatic of a social and economic unit whose agents are differentially vested in power."[96] Familial relationships between parents and children have been influenced by racialized, gendered, and material social inequities. These relationships, which are commonly seen as private are structurally influenced by cultural politics. Although parent-child relationships seem individualized, my interviewees represent their parents as having been influenced by the structural, social inequities and cultural politics.

My interviewees were able to reflect on ways where they have fulfilled model minority traits; however, they also show how the model minority myth is inherently unfulfillable. When Maria was asked if she felt that she had achieved the success that was expected of her while growing up she answered:

> Uhm to be honest, just the marriage part... I'll give myself a pat on the back for that, but I think in terms of education I'm not accomplished yet. College is still, it's good, but it's

[96] Ibid, 6.

> not the highest level of achievement. Obviously, for a home I have not achieved that. I think I've made it very difficult for myself because I moved to California, but yeah and then a nice car. I mean I love my reliable car, but it's not new or nice, and that's something we're working towards getting. So I got one out of the five I guess.

Maria seems to have a very precise understanding of what she is supposed to do and be, to a point where she can even quantify measures of success. Maria gives herself credit for being married and having gone to college but knows that her status as a tenant and inability to purchase an expensive car hold her back from reaching the level of success that she understands is expected of her. Maria reflects on how the state of precarity that her family experienced while she was growing up is a source of motivation for her to attain certain achievements.

> If we can afford a home in California in the future, and drive a decent car, a nicer car. I'm not big in having to drive a beemer or anything like that. I know people in our community are, like, the flashier the car the better. I just want a reliable car that will last forever, like get me a Toyota Prius and I'm happy…I mean it's still nice to be able to afford those things, but I think about the future and having a family, like just being able to provide and not have to relive what my childhood looked like to me is important. And I care less and less about what the community perceives me as doing wealthy and doing well, and more so now like is my family doing well… And then my own family, what I need in terms of having kids and stuff. I think something I think about now is, can I afford to put my kids through school and what's a good school district for them.

It is clear that Maria understands that she has different priorities from the rest of her community. This is how Maria redefines success differently from what she has learned growing up. If my interviews are any indication, the model minority myth keeps its subjects feeling like they have failed to fulfill it entirely, thus raising the question of whether it's ever possible to do so. However, Maria does emphasize that rather than striving towards all the standards that her family and community laid out, she would like to ensure stability and quality education for her future children. Although Maria is aware of the high expectations, it is important to highlight that Maria really just does not want to "relive" the precarity of her childhood, whether that may mean

financial instability, social service dependency, or being raised in a single-income household. Maria also mentions that rather than worrying about how the Vietnamese community perceives her success, she would rather prioritize her family "doing well." As an adult who is about to start her own family, Maria still feels responsible for ensuring that her family has their needs covered. Maria recognizes that the displacement and the reliance on social services that marked her childhood are not an ideal environment to recreate.

Tang's theory of "refugee captivity," however, shows that the cycle of poverty and precarity in many cases is inescapable, and although my interviewees have achieved some stability, they are constantly reminded of the precarity they faced growing up.[97] Julie stated:

> It's even really hard for my friends to understand. Even my friends who are Asian American don't understand why my aunts and uncles are still on social services. They'll be like, 'why can't they ask their children? You know this idea of they've been in the states for thirty-something years, why aren't they better off?' So I think it's really hard for me to talk to other people unless they're children of refugees or immigrants who had similar experiences."

This sense of shame is not specific to being Asian American, but it is specific to being the child of a family that utilizes social services. The model minority identity is so focused on the economic success and high educational achievements of Asian Americans that it does not account for the many Asian Americans who survive on social services, leading to embarrassment about low-income status while in school and their family's utilization of social services. Julie's statement also highlights Tang's argument around captivity which explains how, even decades after immigrating to the US, many refugee families are still reliant on social services. Maria also noted "The other day mom was telling me, 'You know I only need to worry about you, [because] your brothers both have their master's [degrees].' You know it's a super Asian thing to say. I'm

[97] Tang, *Unsettled*, 96.

like ‘Thanks mom, but I’m doing fine. You know I’m surviving in California.’” Although Maria describes her mother’s comment as an “Asian thing to say,” and in so doing seems to essentialize it as a cultural tendency, in later comments, she reveals that she understands her mother’s worries as derived from their history of financial insecurity and multiple displacements. When Maria was younger, her family was evicted from their home, and Maria’s decision to move away from Arizona to California, which requires a higher cost of living, is a valid concern for her mother. Despite understanding her mother’s worries, Maria makes it a point to say that she is “surviving in California” meaning that although she has not met her mother’s standards of success, she is redefining it for herself.

Although Ren mentioned that he did not experience pressure to succeed from his community while growing up and did not identify with the model minority myth, like the other interviewees, his experiences of precarity made him define success in various ways that challenge model minority stereotypes. While growing up in Brooklyn, Ren utilized social services and interacted with other working class community members. The world that Ren grew up in did not make him feel pressured to fulfill even specific standards of achievement, and when Ren learned of the model minority myth in college, he did not identify with it. Ren stated:

> I thought my life was okay. I didn’t really have a contrast for it, which upon reflection is really good [because] there’s this stereotype that, you know I met a lot of Asians who believe that Asian Americans are so rich and et cetera but my stereotypes growing up were ‘Oh Asian Americans are all so poor and et cetera.’ So I never understood the model minority stuff because there was no relevant contrast for me. I didn’t think anything was bad growing up. I just thought it was life… In Manhattan Chinatown you can see tatted up, gangster-ass looking Asian guys running around and ghetto-ass dudes and you’re like ‘what the fuck.’ I always thought [it] was some weird joke. I didn’t actually think the nerdy Asian guy that studied hard and played the violin existed.

Manhattan’s Chinatown showed Ren another side of Asian American life that contrasted what he later learned to be the model minority myth. This all seemed to surprise Ren whose parents had

different expectations. When asked how he understood what was expected of him when he was younger, Ren responded:

> They just told me to not starve. It was very vague that I should buy a house, I was never pressured to be a doctor or a lawyer or accountant, something good like that. No one really was in my neighborhood. It was something good to kind of strive for but no one was like 'oh be a doctor, be a lawyer.'

Ren experienced growing up dependent on public assistance, and he knew that his only expectation from his parents was to "not starve." Given Ren's family's history of financial insecurity, the goal to "not starve" actually means the ability to navigate complex systems that would make sure that Ren didn't end up back on welfare. Ren currently works in finance as a quantitative analyst, and when asked how his parents responded to his career choice, Ren said, "My parents just think I did a good job." Ren is financially independent, holds a degree, and is able to financially provide for his parents. Ren has achieved upward social mobility beyond the expectations that were outlined by his parents. For Ren's parents, "doing a good job" can just mean "not starving." Ren's story brings more complexity to the redefinition of success because it is different from the model minority narratives that that of my other interviewees.

While school is typically a site where Asian Americans are expected to succeed and thrive in, many of my interviewees reported that at times school became associated with embarrassment and shame because of their family's low-income status. Aiden stated:

> High school was a big turning point for me in my social awareness and becoming more socially conscious as a low-income, queer, Sino-Vietnamese person of color and having to tackle what it meant for my sister and I to go to college and applying to college and getting loans and everything. That's when it really hit me like, oh we're low-income, and people sometimes don't even take out loans because their parents just pay for it. That was like mind-boggling to me. I was like, 'what?'

According to Aiden, school highlighted differences as it made apparent the income disparities between Aiden's family and other families. Aiden confronted once again his many marginalized identities years after he began navigating social services for his family. This was apparent with my interviewees who were stigmatized and made to feel ashamed for needing assistance.

Julie also mentioned that she was made aware of her family's low-income status at school. Julie said:

> When I was in school, a lot of my classmates got reduced lunches like me and that was already stigmatized, like 'you don't pay when you go?' Your name is on a ledger like you already kind of felt that stigma associated with that. They'd be like 'oh your shoes aren't from Nike or Adidas or Converse, it's from the flea market or Payless,' something like that, knock-offs. I think natural peer pressure gave you the idea of what was cool and what was different and what you should feel ashamed about. I remember sometimes my grandmother would walk the six blocks to school to get me, and it was like no one else's grandma would walk six blocks to go pick up their grandkid, like, 'why isn't your mom here? Why isn't your dad here?'

Julie was able to connect various forms of non-normativity that were all made apparent to her in school. From not being able to afford the full price of school lunch or status-marked clothing to having to rely on extended family for childcare because of her parents' need to work long hours, school was where Julie's family's poverty was evident. Julie's experiences are not only representative of her experience as a low-income student, but also as the child of a family that utilized social services.

Similarly, Maria spoke about how she learned that she was poor compared to other children at school. Maria spoke about an experience where she was invited to a classmate's house for the first time, and she saw how drastically different her friend's living conditions were from her own. Maria stated:

> It was very night and day. Like oh she's living in a super clean home, her parents are both really great at providing for her, and they had supervision, and when she came over to my

> house, there was nobody home. It was just me and my brothers. So that was the first time I felt the distinct separation between being poor and not privileged.

Although this "distinct separation" took place outside of school, the relationships that Maria made through school reinforced the realities of Maria's social and economic status. Through this experience Maria learned that not being poor meant living in a clean house with supervision. Maria continued:

> Our school, [because] we were so poor, I remember one year they took us to go get new clothes...at a thrift shop so that they could help needy kids get donated clothes and shoes and things like that. That happened almost on a yearly basis [because] when we would go back to school we didn't have new clothes or backpacks and things like that. It was me and my brothers, and then you know of course we had other refugee kids at school so we would go with them.

School became a place where Maria and her brothers received support, but also a place where they were reminded of their financial conditions. Although my interviewees were all skilled in being able to navigate services for their families, none of this was recognized when they were in school. The critical skills that were so central to navigating complex neoliberal social welfare bureaucracies for their families' survival were overlooked by neoliberal measures of worthiness.

Despite these messages of shame and stigma, however, my interviewees are able to create narratives of value and worthiness that resisted neoliberal discourses. Through the process of advocating on behalf of their family, my interviewees were able to redefine success and narrate their and their family members' worthiness in ways that demonstrated their ability to survive and thrive in the social welfare system. Attaining social services was a process that many of my interviewees had to partake in, and sustaining these services was a family affair. Family members had to have a high level of facility in navigating social service bureaucracies and in strategizing how to make the meager subsidies stretch. For example, Joann's mother would

strategically plan out her family's consumption in order to make their food stamps last the whole month. Recalling her mother's resourcefulness, Joann shared:

> My mom would always take me grocery shopping with her with food stamps. This is how my mom works, you know the Sunday ad always has coupons for the grocery store. So my mom would always spend all of her Sunday morning cutting up coupons, looking at every single ad, and writing a list of what she needs to get and from where and how can she use those coupons to get a discount, and she calculates literally everything, right? So yes, while we had CalWorks, food stamps, and things like that, for my mom I learned more about the way that she strategized on how to get enough food to feed our family.

Reflecting on these experiences after several years, Joann is able to appreciate her mother's careful calculations. Joann's family may have relied on Joann for access to welfare services, but Joann was also able to learn strategic skills from her mother about how to utilize them. Ong notes similar levels of proficiency amongst the refugees she studies, arguing that "Cambodian mothers, plugged as they were into the system of financial aid and health coverage, demonstrated creative ingenuity in trying to overcome the odds against them and their children."[98] Like the Cambodian mothers in Ong's study, Joann's mother demonstrated creative ingenuity in maximizing coupons and sales to make their food stamps stretch.

Joann's appreciation for her mother's skills grew even further when she started college and lived on her own for the first time. Joann shared:

> I think a lot of people will say they were really embarrassed growing up with their family pulling out their food stamp card. For me it was more so my mom shoving fifty coupons in front of the worker's face, right? Then it's like, after she uses the coupons, then she uses the food stamps. But I mean growing up it was a little embarrassing, right? But I think that I didn't understand how strategic my mom was until I went off to college. Being a broke college student, it's like you have all these necessities, right? Especially when you move out to an apartment you have to buy groceries and stuff like that. So that strategic mindset my mom had with couponing and then using her food stamp versus going straight into the store to buy stuff taught me also how to utilize my resources a little better.

[98] Ong, *Buddha is Hiding,* 136.

Supporting a family with blue-collar jobs and social services takes strategic planning and a spectacular skill set of knowing how to maneuver through different systems. While initially embarrassed as a child, Joann has grown to read her mom's savviness as a highly valuable skill.

Not merely gaining access to social services but knowing how to strategically use them was integral for survival. Joann's mother cuts coupons while Aiden's mother teaches her children to deal with scarcity. Aiden shared a similar experience with food stamps:

> With EBT you kind of have to really think about what you're buying still. Because sometimes towards the end of the month, it's hard to get food stuff just because you run out. At the beginning, we'd be like, 'oh yeah it's back, we can get whatever.' But towards the end of the month, we'll ask our mom if there's anything to eat and she'll be like 'we're kind of low right now so just share.'

Parents used different methods of teaching their children how to utilize social services. Contrasted with Joann's mother's craftiness, Joann pointed to her aunt as an example to show how a lack of strategic planning does not result in lasting benefits. Joann said:

> I think these services only supported my family well because of how strategic my mom was. A majority of my family also utilized social services and for my aunty, how she utilizes her food stamps is, she will just go to the store and just buy everything that she needs without couponing or looking at what's available on the weekly ads, and so she didn't have enough to last the whole month.

Not every family that utilized social services was equipped with the skills to make their benefits last the whole month. strategies for how and when to utilize benefits can be seen as a different definition of success that is not recognized by neoliberal systems. Through the precarity of growing up and utilizing social services, my interviewees learned early on that they had to adopt certain neoliberal discourses in order to protect themselves from that very precarity. However, my interviewees complicate the model minority figure by redefining success. Rather than strictly

striving towards model minority criteria of success as marked only by access to higher education, attaining a high-paying job, and homeownership, my interviewees are able to recognize how the financial insecurity that they experienced as children has created avenues for them to redefine and re-prioritize what success looks like for themselves.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has shown that, as children of ethnic Chinese refugees from Vietnam my interviewees have had to act as intermediaries between their families and the state for their family's survival in the US. The interviews make clear that the inadequacy of resettlement services by the state put my interviewees and their families in a place of precarity. Dependency on social services became ubiquitous among this community, and it also placed immense responsibility on my interviewees as children learning to navigate a disciplining and callous social welfare system. The process of parentification demanded their hyper-competent and self-sufficient behaviors, which can uphold the neoliberal discourses of the good refugee and model minority. However, through the stories shared, my interviewees have shown the complexities of redefining success, and their resistance against the model minority narrative.

The implications for this thesis are that it can inform how the social welfare system can takes more accountability as a part of the state. I hope that this thesis will influence future policies that determine the funding and implementation of public assistance to poor and migrant communities. Like any project, there are limitations to this study. With the exception of two interviewees, this study was geographically limited to services provided in California. However, the focus of the study was not on the actual services that were provided, but on the act of making sense of the limited services that were provided in every setting mentioned. Additionally, since this study was based on my interviewees recalling many stories years after the fact, some of their stories may not be precise however, I interpret the very act of being able to recall these detailed and heartfelt stories as the very reason for the importance of this study. The ways that my interviewees choose to recall these stories are also telling of their complex experiences. For too

many years my interviewees and many other children of poor families have performed labor that has gone unrecognized. I hope this thesis contributes toward making their work visible.

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