

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Vietnamese American Anticommunism

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/75d5b17c>

ISBN

9781598842401

Author

Vo Dang, Thanh Thuy

Publication Date

2013-11-26

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Vietnamese American Anticommunism

Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Vietnamese Americans have utilized their refugee status as a form of political and cultural thread stitching together a sense of identity and community out of displacement and loss. Among those classified as anti-Communist ethnic minorities by social scientists, Vietnamese in the United States are often compared to Cuban Americans who have been able to collectively align with the Republican Party to leverage representation and power in mainstream politics.

With South Vietnam's collapse and the exodus of Vietnamese refugees from the homeland after the Communist takeover, overseas communities that formed in the wake of the war have been staunchly anti-Communist and vigilantly opposed to the new unified Vietnam under a socialist regime. Given the outcome of the Vietnam War, anticommunism has been the dominant community politics for Vietnamese Americans. This political ideology has often erupted in violence and controversy in the last three decades of the twentieth century.

Vietnamese American anticommunism cannot be simply absorbed under the broader umbrella of Cold War McCarthyism that pervaded much of American politics in the 1950s until the fall of the Berlin Wall in the 1989. This form of ethnic politics should be understood as a particular *minority discourse* fraught with tension and irresolution. Vietnamese American anticommunism ideologically opposes socialism in general, but must be historicized as a discourse emerging from the North Vietnam/South Vietnam civil strife, the evacuation of the South's urban elites in 1975, the exodus of the boat people from the late 1970s to mid-1980s, and the reeducation camp experiences of men and women from the former South Vietnam. These particular historical events frame and help to reinvigorate anticommunism as a social movement in the United States.

Normalization and Community Politics

From 1975 until the mid-1990s, the U.S. government enforced sanctions toward their former enemy primarily through a trade embargo with Vietnam. Under

the Clinton Administration in the early 1990s, the United States made a move toward repairing its relationship with Vietnam by lifting the trade embargo in 1994 and extending full diplomacy in 1995. The Vietnamese American community responded to the move toward “normalization” between the United States and Vietnam with mixed emotions. Normalization meant easing communications and travel between homeland and overseas communities that would allow for Vietnamese Americans to keep in touch with family and friends in the old country, send remittances, and travel back to the homeland. However, grievances expressed by this refugee community over human rights abuses and “reeducation” policy under the Communist government continued to go unaddressed, thus the “forgive and forget” gesture of normalization was viewed as an affront to many in the Vietnamese American community.

In 1987, Tap Van Pham, an editor of a Vietnamese-language newspaper in Southern California that ran ads of U.S. companies doing business in Vietnam, was murdered. He was rumored to be a Communist sympathizer. Firebombing, protest, boycotts, and intimidation were all strategies deployed by vocal anti-Communist extremists in the community to draw the boundaries of community and identity for Vietnamese Americans. Pham’s murder was one among a handful of other extreme anti-Communist incidents in Vietnamese America. However, these are by far the more sensationalized incidents in the community that have allowed mainstream media to represent Vietnamese Americans as a fractious group bound by their “homeland politics.” Although anticommunism has certainly created tension and rifts within the community, it has also effectively brought the community together in solidarity against human rights injustices in the homeland and the historical omission of South Vietnamese stories in the U.S. and Vietnam publics.

Flag Controversies

Arguably, the main symbol of Vietnamese American anticommunism is the former South Vietnam flag: bright yellow with three horizontal red stripes. This flag has come to represent a refugee community’s difference from the homeland, now united under a red

flag with one large yellow star at center. The yellow flag has been dubbed the “Freedom and Heritage” flag of the Vietnamese American community. In 2003, Vietnamese American leaders launched a nationwide movement, originating in Little Saigon (Westminster, California), to seek formal recognition of the Freedom and Heritage flag by city and state municipalities. Westminster was the first city to pass a resolution recognizing this flag as a symbol of Vietnamese Americans and since then over 80 cities and 20 states have done the same.

As important icons in contests over political representation, history, and cultural memory, the red flag and the Freedom and Heritage flag have gone head-to-head in public spaces all across the United States, from parks to video stores to universities and colleges. Flag controversies have erupted whenever the red flag has been displayed. Vietnamese American community members and their allies would usually negotiate with or stage a demonstration against the offending institution to replace the red flag with the Freedom and Heritage flag. For example, in 2004, Vietnamese American students at California State University, Fullerton, threatened to walk out of graduation because of the university’s display of the red flag to represent them. They demanded the Freedom and Heritage flag represent them instead. The university responded by removing all national flags from graduation ceremony. In 2008, *Nguoi Viet Daily News*, the most established Vietnamese-language newspaper in the United States, was the target of protests and boycotts because it reprinted a photo of an art installation foot-spa painted as the Freedom and Heritage flag. What these two examples demonstrate is the enduring force of the symbol of anticommunism in the Vietnamese American community.

The Hi-Tek Protest of 1999

Although the anti-Communist movement was said to have lost much of its momentum in the 1990s for Vietnamese Americans, one major event in January 1999 proved to be a historical watershed for the consolidation of anti-Communist politics. In response to Truong Van Tran’s display of the red flag and a portrait of late Ho Chi Minh, Vietnamese Americans protested for

months outside his video store on Bolsa Avenue at the heart of Little Saigon, the commercial and cultural headquarters of America's Vietnamese. Although displaying the red flag and the portrait of Ho Chi Minh may not seem like such a radical move to most Americans who believe in free speech rights, to many Vietnamese Americans these icons serve as cruel and blatant reminders of the reason for their forced exodus from the homeland. Although Tran's intentions were not clear at the beginning, the Vietnamese American community responded in a way that could leave no room for doubt about their feelings on this issue. A 53-day protest ensued as a result of Tran ignoring the demands of community members and refusing to take down the flag and poster. This exhibition of his freedom of speech came at an enormous price, costing him his business as well as his foothold in the Vietnamese American community. The protest proved to be a watershed in the short history of Vietnamese American politics because of the overwhelming participation of Vietnamese Americans from all over the country. The turnout for this event was sometimes over 15,000 protestors, consisting of Vietnamese Americans of first, 1.5, and second generations as well as Vietnam War veterans and other sympathizers.

The Hi-Tek protest can be understood within a discourse of nationalism and community-building. Vietnamese Americans have constructed a nationalist discourse by situating their identities in opposition to the Communist regime in Vietnam. Furthermore the dominant anti-Communist ideology of the community suppressed any deviant political views, thus allowing for a solidarity that is often achieved at the expense of symbolic scapegoats such as Tran.

The Hi-Tek protest, now memorialized by Lindsay Jang and Robert Winn's documentary, *Saigon, U.S.A.*, functioned to unearth the tensions and divisions within the community. The protest served as both a vehicle for the demonstration of conservative, U.S. Cold War politics as well as an outlet for new, critical voices to dissent from the majority view. Thus, Hi-Tek proved to be pivotal in forcing the Vietnamese American community to confront its ideological issues and strategically enact a stance for the sake of mainstream political coherency.

Tran was not the only scapegoat of the Hi-Tek event. Westminster City Council member, Tony Lam, was under attack for his alleged lack of support for the community's cause during Hi-Tek. At that time, Lam was a third-term council member and the first Vietnamese American to be elected to this office in the nation's history. During the months after the Hi-Tek protest, demonstrators gathered outside his restaurant in Garden Grove to chastise him for being disloyal to the community and not hard enough on communism. A group of community organizers attempted to recall Lam from his position.

Although the political consciousness of the Vietnamese American community can be characterized as conservative, underneath the superficial exterior of anti-Communist solidarity lies many different types of affiliations. Even if the only flag allowed to represent Vietnamese Americans is the Freedom and Heritage flag, many Vietnamese Americans may indeed sympathize with the Hanoi regime without an outright display of the Communist flag. Although Tran vocally and visually exhibited his affiliations, there is a silent population who do not choose to be so blatant about displaying their affiliations. One way to read the protest is as a failed effort at reinforcing anti-Communist ideologies because what it actually does is expose the contradictions and cleavages in the community, leaving the space open for new debates and future activism. Furthermore, it is within the nationalist rhetoric of U.S. anti-Communism that Vietnamese American hardline anti-Communists find legitimation and ideological support.

The False Divide: Culture and Politics

Since the 1999 Hi-Tek protest, numerous other national and local protests have occurred in Vietnamese America. In 2007, Vietnam President Nguyen Minh Triet made a landmark visit to the United States to discuss trade relations with former President George W. Bush. He was met with protest in Washington, D.C., as well as in Orange County, California where he also visited.

Yet, the Vietnamese American community is not only interested in political venues. Another significant

indicator of Vietnamese American anti-Communism can be found in a protest against the Bowers Museum of Cultural Arts in Santa Ana, California. In the summer of 1999, two American corporations, Coca Cola and Mobil, cosponsored an art exhibition from Vietnam at the museum. Vietnamese American community members came out to rally against what they deemed a “communist ploy.” What mainstream media focused on in reporting these types of events is the unwillingness of Vietnamese Americans to move beyond anti-Communism to establish stronger relations with Vietnam despite the fact that the United States has been able to accomplish this, as evidenced by the sponsorship of the exhibition. The same message came across in many media representations of the Hi-Tek protest as well.

On a much smaller scale, local protests against performers from Vietnam have erupted all over the United States because they are often viewed as agents of the Communist government. Vietnamese Americans not only make large political statements through events such as the Hi-Tek protest or President Nguyen Minh Triet’s visit, but they also see the important role of culture and cultural production in the dissemination of history and memory. Thus, sites such as art exhibitions and music performances are also cause for concern and demonstrations.

Vietnamese American public expressions of anti-communism must be understood as a performance of rightful belonging to the democratic American nation and a critical engagement with the historical erasure of South Vietnamese stories. Vietnamese Americans’ insertion into American society and “indebted” position toward the U.S. government as political refugees circumscribe a particular intelligible “voice” they have learned to manipulate and claim as a marker of identity and community. Because their entry into the United States was contingent upon their status as victims of communism and therefore freedom-seekers, their expression of anti-Communism may also be understood as a strategic enactment of conformity and assimilation into U.S. democracy while also enabling a writing of a different Vietnamese history from what has been officially sanctioned within the Vietnam and U.S. nations.

Thuy Vo Dang

See also 1.5 Generation Asian Americans; Vietnamese Americans

References

- Aguilar-San Juan, Karin. 2009. *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- De los Angeles Torres, Maria. 1999. *In the Land of Mirrors: Cuban Exile Politics in the United States*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Espiritu, Yen Le. 2006. “Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship.” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1(1–2): 410–433.
- Jang, Lindsey, and Robert C. Winn. 2002. *Saigon, USA*. 57 minutes. KOCE-TV, California.
- Kelly, Gail Paradise. 1977. *From Vietnam to America: A Chronicle of the Vietnamese Immigration to the United States*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Le, C. N. 2009. “‘Better Dead Than Red’: Anti-Communist Politics among Vietnamese Americans.” In Ieva Zake, ed., *Anti-Communist Minorities in the US: The Political Activism of Ethnic Refugees*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Nguyen, Viet Thanh. 2006. “Speak of the Dead, Speak of Vietnam: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Minority Discourse.” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6(2): 7–37.
- Ong, Nhu-Ngoc T., and David S. Meyer. 2004. “Protest and Political Incorporation: Vietnamese American Protests, 1975–2001.” *Center for the Study of Democracy, UC Irvine*, 2004. <http://repositories.cdlib.org/csd.04-08>. Accessed September 19, 2012.
- Vo Dang, Thuy. 2005. “The Cultural Work of Anticommunism in the San Diego Vietnamese American Community.” *Amerasia Journal* 31(2): 65–85.