

**Sổ Điểm Hàng Tháng (Monthly Gradebook)  
Trường Trung Học Kiên Tân (Kiên Tân High School)**

During an oral history interview, my dad (Trần Văn Tâm or Tam Van Tran) told me a story about when he was in high school. High school teachers in Việt Nam often pick one student, usually one with the highest grades, to be "head of the class" (trưởng lớp), and to help them calculate the grades in the class. My dad was chosen for several years in a row to do this. During this time, boys who were in high school were allowed to stay out of the draft, as long as their grades were passing. So when my dad saw that two of his friends were going to fail in the class, he changed their grades. For two years in a row, this saved them from the draft. But then the next year when my dad was no longer head of the class – both of them failed, and later died as soldiers in the South Vietnamese military.

I wanted to recreate this gradebook – so I asked him details about how the gradebook was laid out, what kind of paper it was, how it was put together, bound, etc. and we recreated it. I sent it to him in Boston (I live in Los Angeles) and he filled it out with the names that he could remember, then sent it back to me to bring to Washington DC. He said he remembers that there were exactly 42 students in his class, and he especially remembers the names that were near his, in alphabetical order by first name – his two friends that he changed their grades for were near his name in the roster.

We often hear about American boys being scared of the draft, burning their draft cards in defiance, hiding in Canada to avoid the draft. But we never hear about Vietnamese people being scared of or avoiding the draft. There were Vietnamese boys who were just as scared of dying, of the draft, of war, as any American boy was. I think of the often quoted words of General Westmoreland (What a name – and how it speaks of imperialism – West, More, Land): "The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does a Westerner. Life is plentiful. Life is cheap in the Orient." And the body bags continued to stack as the US counted dead Vietnamese people as a sign of "winning" the war.

This gradebook is also a kind of metaphor for how the children of refugees have to piece together our histories and identities from memories, parts of stories, incomplete histories, rather than our own experiences. We don't learn about these stories in school. They are not often thought of as American narratives, even though our refugee families are a part of this American story. So we have to tell ourselves our own stories. But these stories and recreations are never completely accurate, can never tell the whole story. And yet we reach for them anyways, because that is all we have, and it is what we need to do in order to understand where we come from and who we are. This recreation of the gradebook is like this – it is of course not an exact copy, it is missing names, has inaccuracies, is incomplete. But I am hoping it holds some pieces of truth in it, and that by re-making it into a physical object, my dad's story can be heard, seen, held, and felt.

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Kim Nguyen Tran