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Food Impact: Story of a Vietnamese American

Personal Interview/ Historical context:

The person I have interviewed for this paper is named Mikey Nguyen Phan. He was born in 1982 in San Francisco until he was 12 years of age and later moved to a small suburb in Texas until the age of 24. His parents fled from Vietnam after the war where his mother and father were both working in work camps and re-education camps for 7 years. Prior to the Vietnam war, his father was an accomplished naval officer for the South Vietnamese Navy and his mother worked as a nurse. According to Mikey, his father was able to escape with his mother after borrowing a boat from someone they knew and fleeing to Malaysia where they would eventually move to Oakland California. Growing up, Mikey and his family were extremely poor and they were forced to live in a difficult neighborhood until his parents saved enough money to move to a small suburb in Texas.

While I was talking to Mikey, one major discussion we had was placing him within the American community, the Vietnamese American community, and the Vietnamese community. He stated that while growing up in California, he felt a stronger connection to the American culture and the “mixed” neighborhoods he had grown up with. It was not until moving to Texas where he faced racial discrimination and exclusion by the majority white population that inhabited the area. While living in Texas, Mikey explained that he became more involved in Vietnamese American oriented communities such as the Vietnamese church and the Asian fraternities on campus. While discussing this he explained his awareness of his ethnicity and culture and this is what made him want to visit Vietnam.

He visited Vietnam in the Summer of 2017. This was his first visit and his parents' first time returning to Vietnam since they fled. I asked him as to what his feelings were while in Vietnam and he stated that he felt like more of an outsider than as a Vietnamese native. He explained that the people in Vietnam often approached him as an outsider and often did not recognize him as a Vietnamese person. In addition, when I asked about his parents and how they felt, he explained that they felt uneasy and referred to Vietnam as a communist country. Another aspect of this trip that gave him awareness of his "American" culture was the food.

Art Piece:

Food is often recognized as a cultural indicator and can often serve as a mediator between cultures. The piece of art I have made for the Missing Piece Project is that of a bowl of Pho, one of the most recognized Vietnamese dishes in the United States, in the foreground looking out at the Golden Gate Bridge. I wanted to place the bowl of pho in front of the viewer as a first-person perspective as a way to convey the perspective of an outsider looking into the life of another. The bowl of pho is placed in the center to represent the centrality that food holds to Mikey's identity as a Vietnamese American. While talking to Mikey, he explained that upon arriving to Vietnam for the very first time, the most distinctive memory he held was the food. After simply asking, "What's something that you remember most about your trip?" he responded with profiling the flavors of the food. Growing up, food was central to his connection to his parents' culture and his community.

The second image of interest is the imagery of the Golden Gate Bridge in the background. Mikey grew up in Oakland California, but this isn't simply the place he was raised. After talking with Mikey, he explained that while visiting Vietnam for the first time he felt as though he was an outsider. When asked, "What would you identify yourself as?" he quickly exclaimed,

American. He went on to explain that this trip to Vietnam actually solidified his identity as an American rather than pulling him closer to his Vietnamese culture. In the same way that food served as a signifier of his Vietnamese culture, this trip actually made him realize how Americanized he was. While food stood as a primary indicator of his cultural heritage while in the United states, this very thing stood as what set Vietnam apart from his Vietnamese American upbringing. While it seems paradoxical, food was a primary foundation for his culture while in the US, but once he arrived in Vietnam, the beloved dishes he grew up with were extremely different tasting. He explained that the food in the south was far too sweet for his liking and that the food to the north was far too salty. While these dishes had the same names and appearances, he explained that this flavor did not cater to the Americanized Vietnamese food that he was used to.

I wanted to create a space in which the bowl of soup overlapped with the background imagery to express that these two are close in relation to one another. I also chose pho as a popularized Vietnamese food throughout the United States in order to symbolize the Americanized-Vietnamese food that Mikey missed so greatly while in Vietnam. In addition, I chose various yellow tones to represent what Mikey associated with Vietnam. When I asked him what colors he associated with Vietnam he stated that the yellow striped flag was what he generally associated with Vietnam. In the same way that the bowl of soup and the California landmark shared the same space, I wanted to create a similar effect through connecting the yellow sky. This piece of art is meant to capture the mixture of identity that Mikey feels. While in the white suburbs of Texas he felt distinctly Vietnamese, but while in Vietnam he felt American. I want to use this art as a means to represent the two dominant cultures at play and analyze how these have blended together. This object is a product of the refugee experience and

is meant to convey contemporary feelings toward the country of Vietnam as it stands today. With the blending of these two identities and cultures, I wanted to also acknowledge a normalization of relations between not just the United State and Vietnam post war, but also the bridge between not just generation gaps but also the bridge between Vietnam and Vietnamese Americans who wish to revisit their histories and cultures.

Dominant/ Contested Narratives:

Mikey's upbringing and the tragic past his parents overcame are uniquely his own, while at the same time sharing many of the same components of the refugee experience post-Vietnam War. In many ways, the narrative of his parents presented conform to the dominant narrative. Vietnam holds strong associations with the concept of Communism for his parents and in moving to the United States, it appeared as if his parents made an attempt to assimilate and raise Mikey as an American. This idea of casting aside their national identity echoes this concept of a "good refugee, being defined as someone who accepted their cultural assimilation or racial formation as a way to become an American." as seen in Phuong Tran Nyugen's "Becoming a refugee." Another way in which his family in some ways conforms to this image of the "good refugee," is also the achievement of the so-called American dream. His parents arrived to the United States with nothing and after owning small businesses and living in very impoverished areas of northern California, his parents were able to save up enough money to buy a home and send Mikey to a private school.

In some ways Mikey and his family posed contrary to the dominant narrative presented. Despite the negative feelings Mikey's parents held for Vietnam, they taught him about their

¹ Nguyen, Phuong Tran. *Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon*. Urbana; Chicago; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt1w6tdv3>.

struggle and held onto various aspects of their culture such as the food, the language, and a sense of nationalism toward former South Vietnam. Mikey recognized the striped flag of south Vietnam as the flag that represents himself and his community. In many ways, Mikey and his family pride themselves in their culture and have not felt shamed or guilt about being who they are. Mikey, despite not necessarily identifying himself as culturally Vietnamese, has made many efforts to understand his history from not just his parents, but also through Vietnamese heritage communities.

While Mikey's story shares many of same elements as other refugee stories, this story is uniquely his. Despite this imagery of "good refugees" and the narrative that surrounds this stereotype including abandonment of cultural values in order to join the American culture and assimilation, Mikey has in many ways retained his heritage through language, food, and the story of his parents and fought has against these stereotypes or dominant narratives.