

Tricia Nguyen

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Professor Tran

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### Uprooted But Not Rootless

“Mommy, can you help me with this poster for my school project?” Eight-year old me held up scraps of green and orange tissue paper, a visual of the perfect poster in mind but clueless on how to piece it together. We sat down in the middle of the living room, and I watched as she cut the paper into shapes of leaves and flowers, dipped them into a homemade glue of rice and water, and carefully placed them onto the poster to form our family tree. Throughout my childhood, my mother had a hand in all of my projects that required any semblance of artistic skill, whether it was ensuring my lettering was straight or transforming plain paper into imaginative shapes. Her creativity, precision, resourcefulness, and aesthetic sense matched no one else that I knew, but every day for the past twenty or so years, her hands are only used to assemble semiconductors and electronic products. Like the other hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees, her life in South Vietnam was abruptly uprooted, forcing her to start a new life in an unfamiliar country whose language, culture, and people are vastly different from anything she has known before. Having already lost almost everything, Vietnamese refugees must still make additional sacrifices to survive in America, including giving up their passions for menial jobs that earn immediate income. My parents made unimaginable sacrifices so that not only can they survive in a foreign land but also so that their children can have the opportunity to lead comfortable, fulfilling lives that they were deprived of. Through my own family’s story of their journey from America to Vietnam and our lives thereafter, I explore the sacrifices and the

immigrant generational gaps that exist between first and second generations of Vietnamese Americans.

“Our parents were tasked with the job of survival and I with self-actualization.” Bo Ren, a writer and product manager, wrote this statement on Twitter, which widely circulated the Internet, showcasing the pervasiveness of the immigrant generational gap. When asked if she would have pursued a different career had the Vietnam War not occurred, my mother revealed that she wanted to become a doctor. However, she was unable to pursue a higher education in Vietnam because her father was jailed for being a general of the South Vietnamese Army and the Vietnamese government did not allow people of the opposing side pursue higher education. When she arrived in America at the age of twenty-five, she prioritized working at her full-time job and attending night school where she learned English and basic computer skills. In Vietnam, my mother was always at the top of the class, but in America, she was an assembler, one of the lower positions in the manufacturing company. My mother cited the status of doctors as her primary reasons for her dream of pursuing medicine, emphasizing her family’s poverty in Vietnam and her lowly job in America. Although my parents fortunately do not perfectly fit the stereotype of “helicopter parents” or “tiger mom,” they did stress the importance of hard work and pursuing a respectable career. As Yen Le Espiritu argues, this “investment in intergenerational economic mobility is much more than reflection of ‘Vietnamese core cultural values’: their alleged strong work ethic, high regard for education...Rather, it exhibits the poignant and complex ways Vietnamese refugees and their children use public achievements to address the lingering costs of war...and to ensure their social position and dignity in the racially and economically stratified United States” (Espiritu, 2014). My mother expressed that she wants us to achieve a status where people will believe that we are smart and capable, not necessarily

wealthy. Precisely because my parents did not have the freedom to pursue their dreams, they gave me flexibility in chasing my dreams, unlike many of my peers who are pressured into a select few acceptable careers. Bo Ren captures this difference between generations to work towards self-actualization instead of merely survival with “What a luxury it is to search for purpose, meaning, and fulfillment.” Because my parents provide me with a home, I can freely follow my passions. However, this freedom is accompanied by a sense of indebtedness, to repay my parents back for everything they had done for me. Other U.S.-born Vietnamese Americans share similar sentiments, that is, because “it had cost their parents too much to get here, [so] it was their responsibility to fulfill their parents’ dream of family success via intergenerational mobility” (Espiritu, 2014). When I expressed that I felt an obligation to realize my parents’ dreams and give back, they reassured me that not only are they happy with what they have, they have everything they could ever want. Nonetheless, I still feel unsatisfied because I feel that they deserve so much more, and the reality is that I will probably never be able to fully close that gap of debt between us.

Although sacrifices and the desire to repay my parents represent a deep love, there still exists tangible gaps within our family. Like in other refugee families, the topic of the Vietnam War is often brushed off or avoided altogether. My parents rarely discuss the war except to mention how lucky we are to be in America, and I seldom bring it up out of fear of arousing unpleasant memories and feelings that were purposefully repressed. Thus, this silence is used by both first and second generations to “control and hide but other times to love and protect — an attempt to shield family members from the painful grip of the past” (Espiritu, 2014). Because of this silence, I grew up with little to no knowledge of my own family’s history. The Vietnam War is not a significant part of the history curriculum in American schools either, and

when it is mentioned, the history is overshadowed by a clear Western bias that conceals any other possible perspectives, even that of the people whose soil the war was fought on. For U.S.-born Vietnamese Americans, it was either know nothing about one's own cultural history or view it through a very Americanized lens. As a result, they feel "embarrassed and apologetic" and that "as Vietnamese, they should have known more — somehow," emotions that I have felt throughout this quarter as I was finally able to learn about this critical part of my family's story (Espiritu, 2014). Although my parents did not delve deeply into the topic of war, my dad revealed to me for the first time his first-hand experience of the Tet Offensive. He went into detail about the explosion he heard that morning, causing everyone in his floating village to hide under their boats, and how the gunfire and helicopter noise continued for three days. And the immigrant intergenerational gap narrows every so slightly. Moreover, in my family, discussing the Vietnam War often leads into political discourse, which in turn leads to heated debates due to our differing views, so we avoid the topic for the sake of peace as well.

Within today's contentious political environment, the gap between first and second generation Vietnamese Americans' views of America is becoming more evident. When I directly asked my parents what they thought of America, my mother simply responded with one word: "lifesaver." The immediacy and bluntness of her answer showed how strongly she believed in America's role as savior. As Mimi Thuy Nguyen discusses in *The Gift of Freedom*, this sentiment of gratitude that is shared among many Vietnamese refugees in America is both a "great and terrible thing" in that it creates a power hierarchy and renders the recipient forever in debt to the giver because the gift of freedom can never actually be repaid in full (Nguyen, 2012). Moreover, my grandfather and my aunt are fervent supporters of the Republican Party and President Trump, in part because the Republican Party played a significant role in allowing more

refugees into America after the Vietnam War. Upon entering his garage, one is greeted with Trump posters, American flags, and a calendar of the President and Melania Trump. It is safe to say that a majority of my generation do not view the current government as favorably. Because their adamant loyalty can be traced back to the war, this gap between generations is further deepened. On the other hand, this aspect of the intergenerational gap is narrower in different cases. My father gave a different answer from my mother; knowing that politics is often a sensitive topic, he avoided giving a direct answer and referenced the complexities of war, such as honorable intentions but poor execution.

My dedication object for the “Missing Piece Project” at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., is an art piece in which I created an image of the Mekong River using flower petals. To do so, I placed flower petals of varying colors, such as blue for the water, green for the foliage lining the river, and purple for mountains, onto paper and apply pressure for several weeks using textbooks and other heavy objects so that the flowers’ pigment is transferred to the paper. The technique is inspired by my mother who used to make imprints of flowers in her notebooks, using this method, thus remembering her artistic skills and unrealized dreams. Unfortunately, the pigment was not fully transferred, so I glued on the remaining dried petals. I chose to depict the Mekong River, a symbol of Vietnam, to honor my parents’ past home before coming to America. My father and his family had also lived in boat villages on the Mekong River. In commemorating both their former lives and the lives that could have been, my project remembers the costs of war, especially its enduring consequences on human lives during and after the war. The project thanks my parents and all the refugees who worked tirelessly just to survive in an alien place and remembers their stories in light of the “good refugee” and “model

minority” tropes that ignore their struggles and exaggerate success stories (Espiritu & Nguyen, 2005).

The immigrant intergenerational gap exists in a number of cultures and as a result of many different events, but for Vietnamese Americans, the gap carries its own unique characteristics. The sacrifices and indebtedness, the silences and its implications, and the contradicting world views has wedged themselves between first and second generation refugees, creating conflicts within families and communities. Vietnamese Americans have found their own ways to cope with this gap, whether it is making an effort to openly discuss the war, mobilizing through activism in their communities, or showing their love and gratitude through unique means. Despite being uprooted and transplanted in unfamiliar ground, Vietnamese Americans have not forgotten their roots and hold on to their common history. In appreciating the past and seeking out marginalized stories, not only do we create a more inclusive and accurate history, we are able move forward to mend our wounds and protect against repeating preventable mistakes, in both the ways we fight (or choose) our wars and write history.

## Works Cited

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