

Jianyu Chen

Asian American Studies 171E

Professor Kim

Final Project

06 December, 2019

About The Vietnam War, About The Memory, About The Inherit

This paper examines how the people affected by Vietnam war memory and teach the next generation to learn the war by interviewing people who have refugee experiences or stories from his/her family. I interviewed three people separated by two groups. The first group is a refugee family with a mother and daughter and they share the story of how they get settled in America; The second group's interviewee is from international area studies: multicultural education class. She focuses on how she learns Vietnam from her family and blames the ignore of the Vietnam war history of the U.S. high school education. The education of the Vietnam war has two parts, one is the campus, another part is the family. Through these decades, more and more veteran military who have Vietnam war's experiences pass away, and the truth is being forgotten. The war leaves indelible hurt in people's mind and memory, so how the next generation remembers the war and inherit the family's history become more and more important.

In the first group of interviewees, they are from the same family. The mother's name is Kitty, and the daughter's name is Catherine. Kitty is a Chinese Vietnam and her parents had refugee for twice. The first time was her dad escaped to Hong Kong by boat, and then took another boat to Vietnam, and her mom's side escaped from China to Vietnam.

Can you briefly describe your national identity and family background?

Catherine's Mom (Kitty):

National identity: Chinese Vietnam

Mrs. Kitty: Dad's side escaped to Hong Kong by boat, then took another boat to Vietnam. Mom's side escaped from China to Vietnam. They escaped during WWII. Japan and China were at

war, and many Chinese people were killed by the Japanese. My grandparents had small businesses in Vietnam. My parents had little to no education. When parents grew up, they contributed to their parents' businesses.

Can you describe the experience of immigration/refugees to the United States? What resistances you and your family had met?

Mrs. Kitty: One of my younger brothers was the first to arrive in the US in 1979. He lived in Springfield, Illinois. One of my older brothers came to the US next in 1981. He escaped Vietnam by boat and went to Malaysia. He was then sponsored by the younger brother mentioned above. He lived with that brother in Illinois. I was the third in my family to escape from Vietnam by boat in 1988. A French ship rescued the people on the boat. The rescuers brought everyone to a refugee camp in the Philippines. I had the option of immigrating to France in 6 months. I chose to go to the US, where I had two brothers living there already. Waited 2.5 years to get sponsored. At the refugee camp, I had to teach other people English to make a living. Otherwise, there was no income. The refugee camp only provided food. Refugees relied on their friends and family to send money every month. Came to Monterey Park, CA in 1990 by plane. Sponsored by her brother, who filed paperwork under the Catholic Church. My parents, my younger sister, two of my younger brothers, and my oldest brother arrived in the US by plane in 1991.

Can you describe the process of your family's get settle in the United States, and what kind of difficulties you encountered/overcame in the process?

Mrs. Kitty: My two brothers that came to the US first moved to California a few years after immigrating to the US. When I arrived in California, I went to the Catholic church to study English and get help finding a job. My first job in the US was working at a bank. My supervisor and my coworkers discriminated against me because I was not from Hong Kong. I decided to switch jobs and start working as a cashier in a supermarket. My older brother, the second in my family to come

to the US, helped my other siblings find jobs. We had substantial support in this area. When my parents arrived, my family started renting a condominium in Monterey Park. My older brother and his wife just had their first son in 1991. My family of 9 grew to a family of 11, and we all shared the same condo. I received a lot of help from people and did not very much when adapting to life in the US. People were very kind to me.

How do you learn the Vietnam War through the family/school/films, and what're the differences between different ways, you learn the history ?

Mrs. Kitty: Before the communists entered South Vietnam, I was able to go to school and enjoyed learning and being with my friends. After the communists took over, we could not go to school. I did not know much about the war because I was just a little kid. I just remember being impacted by the tear gas outside. My mom told my siblings and me to run inside and cover our eyes with a wet towel. After the tear gas expired, we would just continue our lives normally. Now and then, there was fighting outside. We just learned to avoid those areas. I learned that communism would not allow anyone to be rich. We had to share resources. The communists would take money from rich people and take them to jail. Many wealthy people from North Vietnam fled to South Vietnam, where communism had less of a hold. Many wealthy people from the North also fled Vietnam as soon as they heard that the communists were coming. In South Vietnam, where I lived, people did not know as much about the consequences of communism. My family grew up poor, so we were not as afraid as wealthy people. We also learned that the communists would force young men to join the military. The only way to avoid this would be to bribe the police or escape Vietnam. We would lose money every month because of this.

How do you see yourselves identity as a US citizen, and how your identity affect your perception of the Vietnam War?

Mrs. Kitty: My perception of the Vietnam War did not change. I was focused on finding work, and the war was in my past.

Will you teach your next generation to learn the Vietnam War? If so, what way you want to teach them and how do you want to teach them?

Mrs. Kitty: I did not teach my kids about the Vietnam War a lot. I just taught my kids about the difficulties we faced. I was too young to understand what was going on.

Through the interview with Kitty, I found that Kitty and her family have a motivated, hard-working, and optimistic precious qualities even though they had faced so many difficulties. The most impact story for me is the way Mrs. Kitty escape from Vietnam by boat. This trip is full of changeless and helpless. However, Mrs. Kitty uses her knowledge to keep her alive in the refugee camp in the Philippines by teaching people English (as the interview mention above, the refugee camp only provides food and most of the people relied on their friends and family). After came to America, she found a job in the bank that was her first job in the U.S. However, her supervisor and her coworker discriminated against her just because she wasn't from Hong Kong. In 90s' America, racism and nation discrimination were still serious even though the U.S. lose the war. The U.S. military brings justice and freedom all over the world, but they don't reflect themselves what they have done to the Vietnamese people. As Viet Thanh Nguyen argues, "from the American perspective, the Vietnamese bodies must be dehumanized, de-realized, to allow for the humanization of the American soldier and the substantiation of his body and, through it, of American ideology and culture" (14 Yen).

In the interview, Mrs. Kitty mentions that she didn't teach her kids a lot about the war because she was very young at that time. In my opinion, Mrs. Kitty represents the group of people who try their best to keep their alive in the war times. Her family had faced so many difficulties in escaping the war. Once is the Sino-Japanese war, the other one is the Vietnam war. An individual

can not change the direction of the history's wheels, but their hardworking and positive should let them go forward and earn a better life.

Catherine helps her mom translate the answers to English, and she learns a lot from her mom. For the missing piece project, Catherine proposals an idea for the piece. The piece's name is called "Running Toward Moonlight", and the piece is showing a story about the night when her mom escapes from Vietnam by jumping up to a little boat and transfer to a French ship to the refugee camp in Philippine. Mrs. Kitty had tried to escape for three-time, but the first two times didn't succeed. The third time, she finally jumped into a little boat that contains full of refugees and escape and star her two and half years of refugee life in the Philippine. We made a little boat and put the boat into a box, and make the sea waves under the boat and print it, and we used acorn shells to make a lotus. The lotus representing how Mrs. Kitty's hard-working and positive even though she had faced so many difficulties. The acorn shell was native growing up in America which representing her next generation will bloom in America well. The little boat contains this family's memory about how the fight for themselves and the memories about the hard times they have overcome, and the boat will be travel and inherit to the next generation.

Katherine Dang is from the IASTD 160 class. She did a very good presentation on her "Multicultural Education in Vietnam".

Below is the interview with Katherine Dang.

What's your name?

Dang: Katherine Dang

What's your major?

Dang: Linguistics. I am also minoring in disability studies.

Can you briefly describe your national identity and family background?

Dang: I identify myself as a Vietnamese-American with Chinese descent. My family came from

Dang: Vietnam and China. My Chinese relatives did move to Vietnam where they met their partners, moved to America (for two reasons: the war or because they got sponsored by other family members in the States), and had my generation.

Can you describe the experience of immigration/refugees to the United States? What resistances you and your family had met?

Dang: I can describe the experiences that my family went through to come to the United States. I've heard numerous stories growing up (mainly regarding my dad's side), and I still hear them today. I would get into extreme detail but I do not think that there is enough time for that, so I hope that a summary will do. My dad's side of the family had to escape. They left in the early years of the Vietnam War. To clarify, "they" consist of my grandma, my dad, his younger brother, and his younger sister. My grandma sent my dad's older brother to escape before them and my grandpa stayed back to fight in the war. My grandpa fought alongside South Vietnam. My dad's escape journey consisted of them having to sneak past security/border patrols to board the boats. Once they were able to board the boats, they retreated to refugee camps on islands by Cambodia. According to my grandma, they traveled in between a few islands before they reached the United States. My mom's side of the family did not have to escape. The story of her immigration to the States was a bit more simple. Her oldest brother moved to America first, after getting sponsored by other extended family members. After my mom's oldest brother settled in the States, he started the process to get the rest of my mom's family (which consists of my mom, grandma, my mom's older brother, and her 5 older sisters) to move to America. As for struggles amid the immigration, after hearing my dad's family's story, I found that the entire journey was a challenge. The fact that they had to escape is a sign that the journey was going to be anything but easy. My mom never told me much about the struggles of coming to America, but she did talk a lot about her struggles getting adjusted to the States after coming here.

Can you describe the process of your family's get settle in the United States, and what kind of difficulties you encountered/overcame in the process?

Dang: The struggles both my parents' families went through were very similar. They had come to a new country with little to no money, both of my grandmas were single mothers (my mom's father passed away when she was in high school and my dad's father stayed back in Vietnam to fight in the war). Both families did not speak English and had to learn a new language as well.

My dad came to America when he was about 10. Because he came at a much younger age, he and his siblings were able to learn English quicker and went to school in America from a young age and completed all of their education here. My dad and his siblings ended up "growing up" in America. My grandma went to a local community college to learn English and to get some sort of license/certification to work. My dad's family did get government aid but my grandma did not want to rely on that only and did everything she could to get out of having to rely on aid. Within a year of coming to America, my grandma got a job at a factory near their home. I don't remember her job title, but she inspected computer/electronic parts to make sure that there were no issues before they got shipped out. Because my dad's family did not have a lot of money, once my dad and his siblings became of age, they took on multiple jobs. From newspaper delivery to food service to janitorial work, they did what they could to make money and to support the family. Most of the clothes my dad's family wore were either second-hand or handmade by my grandma. They all went to a local college, even though my dad and his siblings got accepted into multiple schools because it was the most affordable option, due to their situation. My dad is now a project manager at a tech company. My mom came to America when she was almost twenty. Because she came later, she did not take in as of the American culture like my dad. She started understanding the culture more after having me and my brother. Like my dad's family, my mom and her siblings had to go to school to learn English. My mom's mother never went to school to learn English and did not work. My mom and her siblings went straight to college and picked up jobs to pay for school and life's expenses. My

mom and her sisters worked at a nail salon to pay for their way through school and to help support the family. My uncles ended up working in start-up factories. My mom is now a teacher for students with special needs.

How do you learn the Vietnam War through the family/school/films, and what're the differences between different ways you learn the history.

Dang: A lot of my knowledge of the Vietnam War came from my grandpa because he fought in it. He survived that war and remembers every detail. We barely go over the Vietnam War in school. I remember in high school, the war probably took up about (and I'm not kidding) 3-4 pages of the book. In those extremely few pages, they only speak about the American's version of the war. They mainly go over the whole hippie movement of the 70s than the war though. After hearing everything from my grandpa, I did not believe a thing they "taught" us in history class at school in regards to the Vietnam War. I would also discuss the war with classmates and they would share their grandparent's accounts of their lives during this horrible time. Honestly, American history taught at high schools is biased in my opinion and they do everything they can to make America seem like they had great people in history. Although there are great historical figures and moments, America is not as great and superior as they paint themselves to be in the textbooks. I feel like when it comes to American history that is taught in high schools, they do not acknowledge other perspectives. It is when students get older is when we start learning about all the different perspectives and accounts (besides the accounts from our family members).

How do you see yourselves identity as a US citizen, and how your identity affect your perception about the Vietnam War?

Dang: I do identify myself as a US citizen. I was born here and I have the paperwork that verifies that. I do identify strongly with my Vietnamese roots, which is why I place Vietnamese first in "Vietnamese-American" when I am declaring my identity. I guess I can say that my identity affects my perception of the Vietnam War. All identities carry vast amounts of history and all of us have biases while only being able to experience so much. I know the history I know based on



family accounts, outside accounts, books, etc. But because my family introduced me to parts of my ethnic identity my views do align with them. I will say that I verify what has been told to be through outside accounts and readings to eliminate complete bias, but I don't think you can ever completely get rid of that.

Will you teach your next generation to learn the Vietnam War? If so, what way you want to teach them and how do you want to teach them?

Dang: Of course, I will be teaching the next generation about the Vietnam War. It is a part of our history, and if we do not continue to teach future generations history, then it will be lost. I want the future generation(s) to understand the importance of having multiple perspectives and to understand the importance of knowing how your family history plays a role in your identity because it does. I want to teach them by recounting the stories I was told if my grandparents and parents are unable to. Even if they can, I would still tell them about what happened. I would even tell them what went through my mind when I was being told this, so they can see my understanding and perspective as well. I will also be adding to the family history by telling them about how I grew up and how I was affected.

Katherine points out that America high schools are lack of education for the Vietnam war. It's not enough that just a few pages to explain the war. Additionally, according to Katherine, the Vietnam war, which just had been mentioned for a few pages, is only stand on America's perspective. Remember one's nation's history is important because they should know where are they from and why are they here, and they have the right to know the truth and find out the truth. If the America-Vietnamese chose to forget the reasons why they were here, how come the people will respect them? According to the lecture's reading "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?" by Nguyễn-Vo Thu-Huong points out that, "The senior George Bush's triumphant references to the purging of the Vietnam syndrome by way of the American victory in the 1991 Gulf War and his son's renewed calls to spread American (read market) freedoms abroad in this current gulf war were and are not acts to remember the last time we did this through war. They are acts we undertake to

forget, to conjure triumph from defeat” (Huong 2). The U.S. government has set up all kinds of traps to let Vietnamese refugees and their next generations to forget the truth and only learn America’s perspective’s history. The first generation’s refugees maybe remember the war, but how many of them will teach their next generation? Therefore, education’s family’s part comes more and more important. According to Katherine, her grandpa fought for the South Vietnamese army, and her knowledge about the Vietnam war is mainly heard from her grandpa. After hearing her grandpa’s story, Katherine being chosen not to believe what they “taught” in history in the school. Use different angles to see the history and do critical thinking is important too. And Katherine’s grandpa’s Vietnam war memories and his stories become a gift for her. This is kind of inherit for the family, and the family’s memories affect one’s personality. Katherine has a strong personality because she knows what she wants and what should learn from school. Katherine explains that why she identifies herself as a Vietnamese-American is because she does identify strongly with her Vietnamese roots. Because of her family experiences, she decided that she want the future generations to understand the importance of having multiple perspectives and to understand the importance of knowing how one’s family plays a role in one’s identity.

In conclusion, both two groups of people have similar settlements in America experiences. Both of their families had faced countless troubles when they get settled in the U.S.—They may have to face discrimination, language problems, and financial problems, but all of them have successfully overcome. Differently, Catherine learned the refugees experience stories from her mom, and Katherine learned the Vietnam war from her grandpa. In nowadays, family education is the easiest and the most effective to teach the next generation to remember the war. Once again, remember how ones’ family comes from and why they came here are important.

#### References

Espiritu, Yen Le. "The "We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose" Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the "Fall of Saigon"." *American Quarterly*, vol. 58 no. 2, 2006, p. 329-352. Project MUSE, DOI:10.1353/aq.2006.0042.

Anna N. Vu. (2017) The politics of memory and commemoration: the flag debate and perspectives of Vietnamese diaspora intellectuals in North America. *Diaspora Studies* 10:1 pages 25-44.