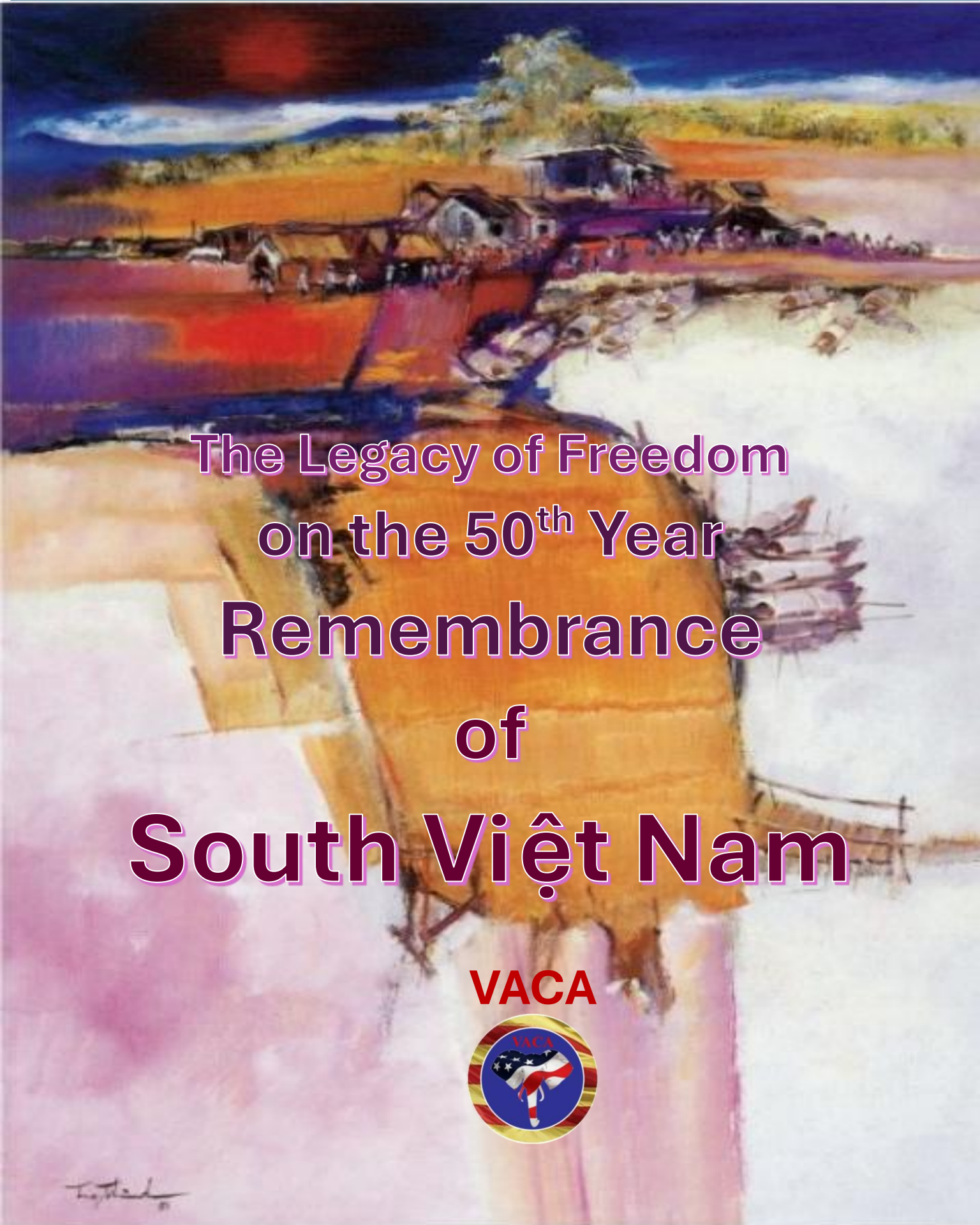

The Legacy of Freedom
on the 50th Year
Remembrance
of
South Việt Nam
VACA
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The Legacy of Freedom

On the 50th Year

Remembrance of

South Việt Nam

Vietnamese American
Conservative Alliance

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By Anh with the background oil on canvas by Artist Trương Thị Thịnh



Down the River – Oil on canvas by Artist Trương Thị Thịnh

Foreword

April 30, 2025, will mark the exact 50 years that South Việt Nam was overrun by the marauding communists of North Vietnam. A Constitutional Republic with freedom and democracy for over 20 years (1954-1975) for the South Vietnamese was taken down at gunpoint and replaced with a regime of Marxist Communist Totalitarians. The subsequent Vietnamese diaspora sent millions desperate people escaping by any means possible to "Live Free or Die". Many did die but many made it with the majority settled in the USA as refugees. The first, second and third generations of these Vietnamese Americans, all have their own stories to tell. This book is a compilation of their writings together with some from the American and South Vietnamese veterans telling their experiences defending freedom of South Việt Nam from their perspective.

On this somber occasion, let's read this book to hear the stories from victims of Communism, from warriors who fought against Communist tyranny, and their descendants, many are school children carrying on the legacy of Freedom and Liberty in the USA.

Dr. Pham Hieu Liem
CEO
Vietnamese American Conservative Alliance

Our appreciation to our contributors:
our students - winners of the writing competition
our Vietnam Veterans
officers of South Viet Nam's Arm forces,
and our dear friends - senior Vietnamese Americans.
Thank you for your support and dedication.



Table of Contents

A. Students Writing Competitions:

The Vietnam War – 1st Prize Winner Daniel Nguyen……..1
The History Behind April 30th, 1975 – 2nd Prize Winner Tina Nguyen…….....5
The Fall of Sài Gòn – 3rd Prize Winner Lily Pham……7
The Việt Nam War: Struggles and Sacrifices- 4th Prize Winner Jenny Nguyen…… 9
South Việt Nam and a Young Refugee – 5th Prize Winner Tina Nguyen……12
Country – Honor – Duty - Matthew Major……15
What do you know about Vietnamese Culture? - 7th Grade Kara Pham……16

B. Vietnam Veterans

My Longest Trip - Bill Dixon (VVA chapter 787)……18

C. South Vietnamese Military Officer

Selfless Suffering - ARVN Officer Ducem……19
My Mathematic Teaching Journey - ARVN Officer Ducem……..21
The Meaning of My Life - ARVN Officer Ducem……22

D. Senior Vietnamese Americans

April 30: Memories of My Motherland - Diệu Thuận……26
Naturalization: The Americanization of Our Name –Nhu-Nguyen Duong…….32
After 50 years of living In America, I still don't know I am Vietnamese or American - Nhung Lam……...39
Boat People – Anh Truong-Nguyen……43
The Legacy and Spirit of the Yellow Flag with Three Red Stripes and "The Call of Citizens" – Anh Truong-Nguyen……45
Vietnamese Folk Tale: The Mountain God and The Lord of The Waters
Sơn Tinh - Thủy Tinh – Anh Truong-Nguyen……46
In The Name of Liberation – Anh Truong-Nguyen……50
Liberty – Anh Truong-Nguyen……51
Minh's Diary – Anh Truong-Nguyen……..52
The One-Eyed Lieutenant – Pham Phan Lang……55
April – Leaving My Homeland – Pham Phan Lang……56
4/30/2020 – Pham Phan Lang……57
Traditional Customs of Vietnamese Lunar New Year (Tết) - Pham Phan Lang…….58
My Vantage Point: American Politics Nowadays - Vũ Linh……61
Đà Lạt In Early April 1975 - Nguyễn Đình Cường……69
Our Journey to Freedom by Sea - Nguyễn Lâm Viên……71

A Love Story in Wartime – Yennga & Chieu……..74



Greenfields – Oil on canvas by Artist Trương Thị Thịnh

Please follow us to explore our culture, histories, community, and people's world.

Enjoy your reading!

The Việt Nam War

By First Prize Winner Daniel Nguyen



The Vietnamese War is one of the most severe wars in the world. Many American citizens protested against this war. But, for Vietnamese people it was impactful. The Việt Nam War altered the course of Việt Nam's future and people. South Việt Nam opposed the idea of communism infiltrating Việt Nam, which would then cause a massive war. The South of Việt Nam flag was the only encouragement that anti-communists had in the war.

First of all, South Việt Nam had an interesting history before the war. The origin of South Việt Nam was the kingdom of Funan (which existed from 1 CE to 6 CE) after this was the Khmer Empire (from 8 CE to 17 CE). South Việt Nam was bordered by North Việt Nam, Laos to the northwest, Cambodia to the southwest, and Thailand across the Gulf of Thailand to the southwest.

After the 1954 Geneva Conference on 21 July, Việt Nam gained independence from France but was divided into two parts: North Việt Nam which was in control by Viet Minh, and South Việt Nam which received financial and military aid from the U.S. In November 1955, the Việt Nam War started. This battle was between North and South Việt Nam. North Việt Nam got help from China and other neighboring countries. South Việt Nam got help from the United States. The United States sided with South Việt Nam because they were afraid communism would spread to the south. On January 30, 1968, North Việt Nam launched a series of attacks at South Vietnamese and United States targets. This would soon be the turning point for the war. On March 30, 1973, The United States seceded from the Việt Nam War. However, earlier in the year, President Nixon signed an agreement with North Việt Nam to end the war. However,

North Việt Nam continued the war despite signing the contract. This would later be known as the “Post-war war”.
Secondly, April 30th, 1975, was a major and impactful event in the lives of many Vietnamese citizens. On this day, Sài Gòn fell to communism, and South Việt Nam was completely infected with communism. Many people fled the country to other places such as the United States. Many Vietnamese people were devastated to leave their home country but did it for a better future. Some people still stayed in Việt Nam despite communism, because they did not want to leave their homes and family. To summarize, April 30, 1975, was the final attack on South Việt Nam, the fall of Sài Gòn and South Việt Nam, and the outcome of the Việt Nam War.

Moreover, South Việt Nam’s flag represents the bond between all Vietnamese citizens. The flag consists of a yellow field and three horizontal red stripes and can be explained as emblematic of the common blood running through northern, central, and southern Việt Nam. The flag was designed by Lê Văn Đệ in 1948. During the reign of Emperor Gia Long, this flag was used as a symbol of the empire of Việt Nam. The 3 red stripes of the South Việt Nam flag represent the common blood of all Vietnamese people. The yellow background on the flag represents the Sun and light. Today, people still use the flag as a symbol of ethnic unity or to protest against the current government. Nowadays, people use the South Vietnamese’s flag in North America and Australia. After the Việt Nam war ended communist authorities removed South Việt Nam’s flag to a flag with a red background and a yellow star in the middle, which is the nation’s flag.

Next, Việt Nam flag’s has evolved over a long period. First, in 1778-1788, the flag of the Tay Son dynasty had a yellow border and a red background. Next, in 1788-1802, the flag of the Tay Son dynasty now had a yellow circle in it. After that, the Nguyen Dynasty changed the flag to a teal border, with an orange background and a red circle. From 1890- 1975, the flag changed to a yellow flag with 3 red stripes in the middle. After that, they changed the 3 red stripes to a big red stripe. Later, they changed it to a red flag with a yellow star in the middle after the Việt Nam War.

Lastly, my dad who was one of the “Boat People” (left Việt Nam on April, 29, 1975) said that everyone left their homes and property to escape from communism and move to neighboring countries. However, his parents stayed back since they did not want to lose their house and family. Throughout my research on the Việt Nam War, I learned that the fall of Sài Gòn is because the U.S. left the war, because of all the hate they were getting since they participated in the Việt Nam war.

The Journey to Freedom

The refugees’ first destinations were Hong Kong and the Southeast Asian locations of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. However, because Việt Nam had a dispute between Cambodia and China, they weren’t allowed to settle there.

This led to an exodus of people who traveled to China by boat. Their next destination was across from where they were at. But, it wouldn't be a smooth trip.

First, people who left Việt Nam to search for freedom faced many challenges for both men and women. During a Vietnamese movie I watched, one of the problems was people's boats getting raided by pirates, men being cruelly killed, and women got raped. Some people tried to escape, but sadly fell down into the sea.

Another problem was the lack of food and water since each boat contained 200-300 people and traveled for several weeks. Food and water had to be given to women with children first. However, in the next weeks, there was no food or water left on the boat so some of the refugees died of hunger. Some people started drinking saltwater to temporarily fill their thirst, this would lead them to get thirstier.

More problems were also introduced such as outbreaks of diseases. Many deaths were caused by Malaria, dysentery, and chickenpox. At the time there were barely any doctors on the refugee boats; if there were doctors they wouldn't have the needed equipment to help the patient. Since diseases are contagious, it would wipe out everyone on the refugee boat.

Another big problem was rough weather at sea. Boats would get flipped during thunderstorms and hurricanes; thousands of lives would be gone. If the boat and people were to survive the storm would cause wreckage on the ship which would lead to it drowning. Survivors would stay on their boat until they could find a rescue boat or a freighter (Cargo ship) to pick them up and drop them on refugee islands. However, these refugee islands were not able to hold for long since there was an atrocious number of refugees. In 1979, Bidong Island, owned by the Malaysian government, had more than 40,000 refugees. Refugees thought surviving would be easier on the island but there were severe conditions.

A man named Le Phuoc said, "I left Việt Nam with 17 other people in a boat 23 feet long to attempt the 300-mile passage across the Gulf of Thailand to southern Thailand or Malaysia. The two outboard motors soon failed and we drifted without power and ran out of food and water. Thai pirates boarded our boat three times during their 17-day voyage, raped the four women on board and killed one, stole all the possessions that we had, and abducted one man who was never found. When the boat sank, we were rescued by a Thai fishing boat and ended up in a refugee camp on the coast of Thailand."

Another of many stories tells of a boat carrying 75 refugees that was sunk by pirates with one person surviving. The survivors of another boat in which most of the 21 women aboard were abducted by pirates said that at least 50 merchant vessels passed them by and ignored their pleas for help. An Argentine freighter finally picked them up and took them to Thailand.

Life at the refugee camp was harsh. Food and drinking water had to be imported by barge. Water was rationed at one gallon per day per person. The food ratio was mostly rice and canned meat and vegetables. The refugees constructed crude shelters from boat timbers, plastic sheeting, flattened tin cans, and palm fronds. Sanitation in crowded conditions was the greatest problem. The United States and other governments interviewed people on the island and gave opportunities for resettlement. All of the refugees agreed to this, the last refugee left in 1991.

Vietnamese refugees had to undergo a screening process that determined if they were Vietnamese refugees or not. This significantly decreased the number of Vietnamese "refugees". UNHCR statistics from 1975 to 1997 indicate that 839,228 Vietnamese arrived in UNHCR camps in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong. They arrived mostly by boat, although 42,918 of the total arrived by land in Thailand. 749,929 were resettled abroad. 109,322 were repatriated, either voluntarily or involuntarily. The residual caseload of Vietnamese boat people in 1997 was 2,288, of whom 2,069 were in Hong Kong. The four countries resettling most Vietnamese boat people and land arrivals were the United States with 402,382; France with 120,403; Australia with 108,808; and Canada with 100,012.

To conclude, the history of the Vietnamese War, April 30th, and South Việt Nam's flag is worth knowing. The development of South Việt Nam and the tension between the 2 areas of Việt Nam caused the war. South Việt Nam lost the war because North Việt Nam had more support from other countries. Meanwhile, South Việt Nam had only the U.S., which left in the middle of the war; therefore, leading to the tragedy of April 30, 1975. However, the only spirit or hope of South Việt Nam remains in its flag which people still have today. 40% of Vietnamese refugees successfully made it to neighboring countries, while the other 60% died of severe weather, diseases, and pirate attacks. Those who escaped Việt Nam when South Việt Nam fell, traveled by land or water, to risk their lives for freedom.

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Escaped – Charcoal by Anh @atn

The History Behind April 30th, 1975

By Second Prize Winner Tina Nguyen

April 30th, 1975 marks a significant day in history known as the Fall of Sài Gòn. This date signifies the end of the Việt Nam War, as the North Vietnamese forces captured Sài Gòn, the capital of South Việt Nam. The event followed years of intense conflict, symbolizing not just the fall of a city but the collapse of the South Vietnamese government.

The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) launched their final offensive in March 1975. This campaign, known as the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, rapidly advanced southward, overwhelming South Vietnamese forces. Despite desperate pleas for additional U.S. support, the South Vietnamese were left to fend for themselves. By the end of April, it became clear that Sài Gòn could not be defended.

As NVA tanks rolled into Sài Gòn on April 30th, chaos erupted. The U.S. Embassy orchestrated a dramatic evacuation, known as Operation Frequent Wind, where American personnel and at-risk South Vietnamese were airlifted to safety. The iconic image of helicopters taking off from the embassy roof symbolizes this desperate escape. The fall of Sài Gòn marked not only a military victory for North Việt Nam but also a profound shift in geopolitical dynamics, concluding the Việt Nam War and leading to the reunification of Việt Nam under communist control.

South Việt Nam, officially known as the Republic of Việt Nam, existed from 1955 to 1975. Established after the Geneva Accords of 1954, which temporarily divided Việt Nam at the 17th parallel, South Việt Nam was recognized as a separate state with its capital in Sài Gòn. The early years of South Việt Nam were marked by efforts to build a stable government amidst internal political turmoil and external communist threats from the North.

Under the leadership of President Ngô Đình Diệm, South Việt Nam initially received substantial support from the United States, which sought to prevent the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. However, Diệm's authoritarian rule and failure to garner widespread support led to increasing instability. His assassination in 1963 paved the way for a series of military and civilian governments, none of which could establish lasting stability.

The Việt Nam War dominated the history of South Việt Nam. The conflict escalated in the 1960s as the U.S. increased its military involvement, supporting South Việt Nam against the communist Việt Cộng insurgency and North Vietnamese forces. Despite significant American military aid and presence, the South Vietnamese government struggled to maintain control. The war's toll on the South Vietnamese population was immense, with widespread destruction, loss of life, and displacement. The fall of Sài Gòn in 1975 ended South Việt Nam's existence, leading to the country's reunification under communist rule.

The flag of South Việt Nam, known as the "Heritage and Freedom Flag," consists of a yellow background with three horizontal red stripes. This design symbolizes the southern land of Việt Nam and the three regions of Việt Nam: North, Central, and South. The yellow color represents the skin color of the Vietnamese people, and the red stripes signify their blood and the sacrifices made for freedom.

The flag was first adopted by Emperor Thành Thái in 1890 as the national flag of Việt Nam under French colonial rule. It later became the official flag of the State of Việt Nam in 1949 and continued as the national flag of South Việt Nam from its establishment in 1955 until its fall in 1975. For many Vietnamese expatriates, the flag remains a powerful symbol of heritage, freedom, and resistance against communism. Today, it is flown by Vietnamese communities around the world as a tribute to their homeland and their struggle for independence and democracy.

My family's history is deeply intertwined with the history of South Việt Nam and the events surrounding the Việt Nam War. My grandparents lived through the French colonial period and witnessed the struggle for independence. They experienced the brief period of hope and turmoil that characterized South Việt Nam's existence.

My parents were born in South Việt Nam during the war years. They grew up amid the conflict, witnessing the hardships and the resilience of the South Vietnamese people. My father's family was directly affected by the war, as my grandfather served in the South Vietnamese army. The fall of Sài Gòn was a turning point for them, as it marked the beginning of their journey as refugees.

In the chaotic days following the fall of Sài Gòn, my parents, along with thousands of other South Vietnamese, fled the country. They faced immense challenges, including perilous journeys by boat and time in refugee camps. Eventually, they resettled in the United States, where they worked hard to rebuild their lives. Their story is one of resilience, determination, and hope. They instilled in me a deep appreciation for our heritage and the sacrifices made by previous generations.

The history of April 30th, 1975, and South Việt Nam is a poignant chapter that has left a lasting impact on many lives, including my own family. The fall of Sài Gòn marked the end of a turbulent era and the beginning of a new journey for countless Vietnamese

refugees. The South Vietnamese flag continues to symbolize the spirit of freedom and resilience. Through this essay, I have endeavored to honor the history and legacy of South Việt Nam and to share a glimpse of my family's story within this broader historical context.

Reflecting on these events, it becomes clear that the history of South Việt Nam is not just a tale of political and military struggle but also a testament to human resilience and the quest for freedom. The stories of individuals and families, like my own, who lived through these times, add a deeply personal dimension to our understanding of history. They remind us of the courage and determination required to rebuild lives in the face of adversity.

Moreover, this history serves as a powerful reminder of the complexities of war and the profound impacts of geopolitical decisions on human lives. It encourages us to reflect on the lessons learned and to strive for a future where such conflicts are avoided, and peace is pursued with earnest dedication. Understanding and remembering the past is crucial in shaping a more just and compassionate world.

In conclusion, the fall of Sài Gòn and the history of South Việt Nam are not just historical events but chapters filled with human stories of bravery, loss, and hope. My family's journey from South Việt Nam to a new life abroad encapsulates the broader narrative of struggle and resilience. By preserving and sharing these stories, we honor the past, enrich our present, and inspire future generations to value freedom and persevere in the face of challenges

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The Fall of Sài Gòn

By Third Prize Winner Lily Pham

The **Fall of Sài Gòn** on April 30, 1975, is a momentous event that I find particularly interesting as a Vietnamese American student studying history and international relations. It's not just a date in a textbook, it's a portal into the complexities of global politics and the consequences of ideological conflicts. This tragic event forces me to play with questions about the role of military intervention, the legacy of imperialism, and the importance of diplomacy in resolving disputes.

First of all, **What is South Việt Nam?** South Việt Nam emerged from the French colonial rule. The 1954 Geneva Accords temporarily divided Việt Nam, creating a communist North and an independent South. The US, fearing that communism would influence and spread, heavily supported the South, installing Ngo Dinh Diem as
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president. However, Diem's authoritarian rule and corruption fueled discontent. The communist North, aided by the Việt Cộng in the South, sought unification. The US escalated involvement, leading to a war. Despite immense resources, the US failed to achieve its objectives. The fall of Sài Gòn in 1975 marked the end of South Việt Nam and the reunification of the country under communist rule.

Next, **What is the significance of the original Vietnamese flag?** It was designed by Lê Văn Đệ in 1948, the original Vietnamese flag was created to represent the unity of Việt Nam, with the three red stripes symbolizing the connection of the North, Central, and South. The yellow background held traditional significance in Vietnamese culture. But, the flag's meaning changed as South Việt Nam's government shifted. It became a symbol of independence from French rule and later, a point against the North. For many South Vietnamese, it represented the hope of a democratic and thriving nation. However, the flag was lowered after the communist North evaded the South and overtook the nation. The original flag is now proudly displayed in the U.S. and selected areas as a symbol of hope that one day Việt Nam will be freed from the communist regime.

I often hear stories about the **Fall of Sài Gòn** at the dinner table because my grandfather lived through the event and its aftermath. My grandfather served in the South Vietnamese military in the 1970s. At the time, South Việt Nam was under attack by the Việt Cộng from the North and the guerrilla soldiers who betrayed South Việt Nam. The Vietnamese people suffered greatly. Many people lost their homes and were displaced from their families during the war. The fall of Sài Gòn was more than just a military defeat; it was a profound upheaval that shattered countless lives. For the Vietnamese people, it marked the end of a long war but also the beginning of a new era filled with fear. As the North Vietnamese army closed in on Sài Gòn, panic and fear gripped the city. Families were torn apart as people desperately sought safety. The loss was profound, not just for the nation, but for countless individuals who saw Sài Gòn as a home.

My grandfather retold the horrifying stories of when Communist soldiers overtook Sài Gòn. All of the men who served in the South military, including my grandfather, were sent to labor camps. The “prisoners” were sent to the forest to cut down the trees or grow vegetables without much food. They were often tortured by guards for information as well as entertainment. Even after many years had passed, my grandfather could still recall the vivid horror that he experienced at the labor camp. As they listened to the wonderful future that the Communist Party would bring, many of the prisoners were shot in the forest because of misdemeanors. Like many people who suffered the same fate, my grandfather could not stand the hypocrisy and took great risks to regain his freedom by escaping the country. He was one of the “boat people”. After countless dangers and a year in an Indonesian refugee camp, he finally settled in the United States in 1982. His stories etched into my mind and his voice triggered so much sadness for the fall of a beloved nation. It was a world turned upside down, a promise of freedom shattered.

I am so proud to learn how my brave grandfather fought hard to defend his nation and protect his family. I hope that the later generations of Vietnamese can continue to learn about this event and appreciate the sacrifices made by those who came before them. Understanding the challenges of this period can foster a deeper sense of identity and pride in their heritage. It's essential to remember that history is not simply a collection of facts but a living tapestry woven from personal stories and collective experiences. While sharing my grandfather's stories and encouraging others to explore this chapter of Vietnamese history, I hope to contribute to preserving an important part of my cultural legacy.



Grandfather and Me *"Telling Stories"*– Charcoal by Anh @atn

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The Việt Nam War: Struggles and Sacrifices

By Fourth Prize Winner Jenny Nguyen

When people think of Việt Nam, they might picture the rich, flavorful bowls of phở or the breathtaking natural beauty of the land. However, beyond its vibrant culture and stunning landscapes lies a profound history that has shaped not only the lives of those in Việt Nam but also the experience of refugees around the world—the Việt Nam War.

Việt Nam's history is marked by periods of significant foreign control. For over a millennium, it was dominated by Chinese imperialism, followed by a century of French
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rule as part of Indochina, which included present-day Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. During World War II, Japan's invasion weakened French control and fueled rising nationalist movements. After Japan's defeat in 1945, various groups moved to assert their influence. Hồ Chí Minh, leading the Việt Minh, established a communist regime in Hà Nội, inspired by Chinese and Soviet ideals. In response, France reasserted its control, supporting Emperor Bảo Đại and designating Sài Gòn as the capital of Southern Việt Nam in July 1949.

The conflict continued unrelentingly until May 1954, when the northern Việt Minh achieved a decisive victory over the French in the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ, marking the end of nearly a century of French colonial rule. A few months later, the Geneva Conference resulted in a treaty that divided Việt Nam at the 17th parallel, with Hồ Chí Minh leading the North and the Emperor Bảo Đại overseeing the South. Driven by a desire for reunification, the anti-communist politician Ngô Đình Diệm was appointed president of the South. Despite both sides sharing the goal of a unified Việt Nam, their visions diverged significantly: the North pursued communist principles, while the South aimed to build a nation closely connected to Western ideals.

With American support, Diệm launched attacks against the Northern communists, whom he derisively called the Việt Cộng. The Việt Cộng fought a guerrilla war using ambushes, sabotage, and small units to maintain control in the countryside. To aid their efforts against the South, the North developed the Hồ Chí Minh Trail—a supply route through Laos and Cambodia that grew throughout the war. In response, U.S. aircraft sprayed Agent Orange and other herbicides over rural areas to eliminate cover and resources. This herbicide not only devastated the land but also had severe health impacts on civilians, including cancer, birth defects, and lasting scars, which persisted for decades. The conflict continued with ongoing violence and shifting dynamics between the North and South.

In January 1968, the Tết Offensive unfolded with a well-coordinated attack by Việt Minh and North Vietnamese forces. Over 100 cities in South Việt Nam, including Huế and Sài Gòn, were targeted, with even the U.S. Embassy breached. These surprising and intense attacks caught U.S. officials off guard, marking a pivotal moment in the war and leading to the gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops from the region. As American troop support slowly dwindled, the burden fell on the South Vietnamese army. A few years later, the U.S. president signed the Paris Peace Accords, ending direct U.S. military involvement.

Without the aid, South Việt Nam's forces began to falter under the North's swift advances. As more provinces fell, the North became increasingly confident, launching more campaigns to gain more territory. The South held out against each battle until they ran out of supplies, but finally yielded to defeat. With the North Vietnamese army preparing for a final push, they targeted the South's capital, Sài Gòn. On the morning of April 30th, 1975, as communist forces stormed the government buildings, the

South's resistance crumbled. With little left to defend, the South surrendered, bringing an end to the decades of conflict. The South Vietnamese flag, with its red stripes on a yellow background, was replaced by the North's flag featuring a yellow five-pointed star on a red field.

The current flag of Việt Nam is closely linked to the country's history, particularly during the war. Following Việt Nam's reunification, the red flag with a yellow five-pointed star was officially announced. Prior to April 30 th , 1975, Việt Nam was divided into two regions, each with its own flag. The South Vietnamese flag, displaying three red stripes that symbolized the shared heritage of its people, represented the republic and was a key emblem of the anti-communist government and its supporters. Known as the "Heritage and Freedom Flag," it remains a symbol of historical and emotional significance for some of the Vietnamese still living in Việt Nam and those who have fled the country after the fall of Sài Gòn. This flag represents a period in Vietnamese history marked by conflict, division, and the struggle for freedom.

The division of Việt Nam left the country in disarray and poverty as the next generation grew up amidst the war's aftermath. My parents faced the challenges of this environment as they began their lives. My father, born in 1972, was a young child when Sài Gòn fell, and he still recalls the difficulties of his childhood shaped by the war. Many of his siblings had to stay home and work to support their large family, with his sisters crafting goods to sell at the market for food. My mother, born a few years later, remembers working hard with her siblings to sell poultry, seafood, and anything else they could grow to buy necessities. Despite their poverty, she remained determined to pursue an education in Việt Nam while helping her family survive. On most days, she would arrive at school with no breakfast and be greeted with a small bowl of rice with a dash of soy sauce when she traveled back home. With a large family, she and her siblings often had only two sets of clothes to endure both cold winters and scorching summers. Driven by a desire for a better life for their children, my parents decided to immigrate to the United States, seeking freedom and new opportunities and leaving their old life behind.

The Việt Nam War stands as a tumultuous chapter in history, marked by immense struggles, sacrifices, and a relentless fight for freedom. The conflict, which divided the nation into opposing sides, resulted in the loss of millions of lives, the separation of families, and lasting scars on the country. During this period, the South Vietnamese flag symbolized hopes for a democratic and anti-communist future. Today, it continues to hold profound significance for the Vietnamese diaspora, reminding them of their heritage and the sacrifices made for freedom. The Việt Nam War underscores the resilience of the human spirit and the persistent struggle for liberty, even in the face of adversity.

Thank you to those who have made sacrifices in the name of freedom during the Việt Nam War.

South Việt Nam and a Young Refugee

By Fifth Prize Winner Tina Nguyen

"By the mid-sixties, the United States had poured more than half a million troops into South Việt Nam," said Nguyễn Cao Kỳ (South Vietnamese military and political leader). Soon, the detrimentality of this quote will ring over the people of South Việt Nam in the face of the overwhelming forces of the North. The history of April 30th has played a prominent role in shaping the Việt Nam we know today, as well as the Vietnamese communities from all over the world. To the communist minds, it is remembered as a day of great celebration of unification and victory. However, for the southern Vietnamese, it birthed a new age of hardships and conflicts, unforgettably etched in remembrance of a day of sadness and loss, as a part of Việt Nam lost to the past.

Amidst the global Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, intense conflict begins to brew in Việt Nam. In the early 19th century, Việt Nam was a colony of France, whose colonial expansion targeted Asia. After a period of French colonial rule, resistance and desires for independence sparked nationalist movements against the oppression. Combined with World War II, which weakened France's hold on Việt Nam, war broke out between the two, known as the First Indochina War. Soon after, in 1954, the Geneva Accords were signed, ending the war but also splitting Việt Nam into two parts—the North and South. Thus began the birth of South Việt Nam. This event positioned the rolling ball of the Việt Nam War and set it into motion because of the rivaling ideological differences between the two regions. While the North received support from the communist USSR and China, South Việt Nam was backed up by the democratic United States and its allies. Through bigger lenses, the Việt Nam War was part of the many proxy wars fought between the two superpowers; however, to the Vietnamese people, it was an instrumental event that shaped Việt Nam's history, carrying the struggles, sacrifices, and fortitude of the people, forever engraved in chronicles as well as the hearts and memories of many. This tragedy transformed the lives of millions of citizens, creating lasting effects that rippled through generations.

Led by Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Party, North Việt Nam fought against the South through guerilla tactics along with military aid from the USSR. On the South's side, they heavily depended on the U.S. 's support and supplies of military weapons and economic assistance, including the training of Vietnamese soldiers and the addition of American troops. Furthermore, the governance in South Việt Nam experienced persistent political instability, which was worsened by the Tet Offensive, a Việt Cộng attack on Lunar New Year (Tet). Even though the South was able to win over the attack, it left a significant effect on the wavering support and increased opposition to war in the United States. This is because the attack caused high casualties among the US troops and indicated that their warfare methods were not completely effective in fighting against the North, planting the seed for withdrawals. As months passed by, the

damages inflicted on the United States in the form of fatalities and costs led them to slowly pull away from the war. The withdrawal of the US's forces was detrimental to the South's resistance against the North because they highly relied on resources provided by the US government. This connects to the introductory quote, as it demonstrates how important the US was for the South's victory and therefore signifies a crucial turning point in the war. Consequently, when the North Việt Nam Việt Cộng launched a large-scale attack on South Việt Nam, nationalist forces faltered after losing a valuable asset and their key to winning. In the obvious imbalance of strength, the communist party slowly seized key cities of the South, such as Da Nang and Hue. Finally, on April 30th, 1975, Sài Gòn fell into communist hands, signifying defeat and the end of the Việt Nam War. The Fall of Sài Gòn, April 30th 1975, marked the day Việt Nam unified together as one under the rule of Ho Chi Minh and his communist party.

Although an independent South Việt Nam no longer exists, it's identity will always be carried and represented in the South Vietnamese flag, Cờ Vàng Ba Sọc Đỏ, symbol of the unity of the people of the anti-communist Republic of Việt Nam. Translated to "Yellow Flag with Three Red Stripes", its symbolism goes much deeper. Starting with the background, the color yellow represents the Vietnamese people as yellow has been long traditionally associated with their culture and lands. Next, the three red lines that run horizontally across the flag represent the three regions of Việt Nam before unification: North (Tonkin), Central (Annam), and South (Cochinchina). Together, the flag embodies the shared connection of the Vietnamese people across the regions in opposition to communism. Under the Republic of Việt Nam, the flag signifies the ambition and pride of the people of the South fighting for their hopes and aspirations, yet also carrying their bravery and resistance against communism. Following the periods after the war, millions of Vietnamese fled overseas to other foreign countries, enduring unimaginable hardships of their journey. Many settled and thus formed diasporas and communities, bringing a part of their homeland represented by the flag. To the people of these communities , it holds tremendous significance as it is a way of illustrating their roots and the history of their heritage. In a way, the flag also commemorates and holds honor to the sacrifices made in the war. Most importantly, the flag acts as a symbol of the homeland left behind and the continuous opposition to the communist regime that took over.

On every trip and for every packed meal, my dad would always bring a simple ham and cheese sandwich. He never got bored of it-I didn't understand why. I've often wondered why he isn't sick of it—a plain sandwich that lacked the umami and flavors he loves. Later, as he told me the stories of his early teens, I finally understood why and that such an ordinary sandwich meant so much to him.

My dad was one of the boat people seeking refuge during earlier periods of the Exodus, the period of large-scale Vietnamese migrants seeking protection from the communists. They fled to nearby countries such as the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia, where

they relocated. Admirably, these people went through extreme hardships, a test of their resilience and bravery, navigating through treacherous waters and endless seas and surviving for a better life. I've been told personal accounts and watched documentaries of the cruelties of their journey, and since I have always respected my dad for being able to overcome such challenges to retell his story, Every journey was unpredictable, and not all were fortunate like him to be able to receive help without being attacked by pirates, as those stories never ended well. At the age of 17, along with his 15-year-old brother, my dad had been impulsively forced to flee with his relatives on a boat, leaving his family behind. In the dead of night, as their boat drifted into the vast ocean, no one had a clue how long they would be out at sea for, and my dad only had with him a packet of ramen. During those 8 days, he had to share the flimsy packet with his brother as their only food source.

Under the restless sun, he faced the risks of dehydration, overcrowding, drowning, and starvation. In the midst of the landless ocean, the human body could only take 3 days of dehydration before death, and during this trip, the chances weren't low. The psychological effects weren't any kinder, really. How long could you float until you slowly started to lose hope of finding land? Or help? After all, it was almost impossible to pinpoint where they were going. However, finally, on the 8th day, the ship was spotted by American rescue ships, who took them in, gave them food, and rekindled their hope. As quoted by my dad, "When I got onto the rescue ship, I remember them giving me a gallon of chocolate milk, and in all my hunger and thirst, I couldn't resist and drank the whole thing, down to every last drop. Next thing you know, the milk went in one way and out the other; not surprisingly, after all, I haven't had a bite of food in my stomach for days." After they were moved onto the rescue ships, my dad and his brother were taken to the Philippines, and then to Guam Island in the Pacific where he stayed in the camps for 3 months. I also remembered him saying, "When I first got off the boat onto land, the people gave me a ham and cheese sandwich, and I ate it up so fast, it was easily the best meal of my entire life." Hearing this, it finally clicked. It made sense why my dad loved his sandwich so much; it was the first real food he had after starving at sea for 8 days, easily a moment that would last a lifetime. The sandwich was a core memory for him, reminding him of the bitter moment when he found hospitality after the rough period he went through. The incident of April 30th initiated a cascade of tragic yet memorable events, including the Exodus (escape refugee crisis/boat people), and, to many, is an important part of our legacy. It truly is what shaped the Vietnamese diaspora from around the world and is engraved in the foundation of Việt Nam's history.



A Hungry Young Vietnamese Refugee – Ink sketch by Anh @atn

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Country – Honor – Duty

By Matthew Major

The Republic of Việt Nam's Military slogan "Country – Honor – Duty" carries a powerful message that resonates with me on many levels. Each word embodies a core value that not only guided the soldiers of South Việt Nam but also aligns with how I approach my own life and career.

"Country" represents a deep sense of allegiance and commitment. For the soldiers, it was about protecting their homeland and standing up for their people. For me, it symbolizes my dedication to serving my community and contributing to something larger than myself. In my work with Hillsborough County and in my studies at USF, I see "Country" as a call to prioritize the well-being of those I serve and to make decisions that benefit the greater good.

"Honor" is about maintaining integrity and holding myself to high ethical standards. The soldiers were expected to carry themselves with dignity, and this is something I strive to emulate in my professional and academic pursuits. Whether I'm working on a project, interacting with colleagues, or engaging with community members, I aim to approach every situation with respect, honesty, and a commitment to doing what's right.

"Duty" reflects the responsibilities that come with the roles we choose to take on. For the soldiers, it was about fulfilling their obligations to their country and comrades. For me, it's about meeting the expectations placed on me in my work and studies, whether it's completing a project, contributing to a team, or pursuing my education in Human
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Resource Management. “Duty” reminds me that the work I do is important, and it requires dedication, discipline, and a strong work ethic.
In many ways, “Country – Honor – Duties” serves as a guiding principle in my life. It reminds me of the importance of serving others, upholding my values, and staying committed to my responsibilities, no matter the challenges I face. Just as the soldiers of the Republic of Việt Nam were called to serve with honor and dedication, I feel a similar sense of purpose in the work I do and the career path I’m pursuing.

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What do you know about Vietnamese Culture?

By 7th Grade Kara Pham

Hi, my name is Kara Pham, I am 12 years old, and I have a deep passion for different types of food. And one thing I love about Vietnamese culture is through food. My mom would make different types of Vietnamese dishes and there wouldn’t be one time where the food wasn’t good. I would always see herbs like cilantro and mint in Vietnamese food. It would make the food so flavorful and colorful. Not only do they use fresh ingredients, but a unique ingredient like fish sauce. It’s mostly in every Vietnamese dish and makes Vietnamese food special. One of the most famous dishes in Việt Nam is Phở. My favorite Vietnamese dish would have to be Bún Bò Huế. The spicy beef soup is so tasty that I can eat another bowl of it. Every Vietnamese dish has a background such as where they originate. For example, Pho originates from the North and Bun Bo Hue originates from Central Việt Nam. You can see abundances of food on Vietnamese New Year, also called Tet. It is a big traditional event in Vietnamese culture.

During Tết, my family and friends gather around to celebrate and have lots of food. The iconic foods during Tet for every family is called “Thit Kho” meaning caramelized pork and eggs. Another one is called “Banh Trung” meaning glutinous rice and mung bean filling inside. These dishes are famous during Tết because it represents gratitude towards parents and appreciation to the elderly. We would also see the traditional dragon dance during Tet. The dragon dance leads to good luck and blessings for the community. Children including me would get red envelopes with lucky money inside, symbolizing good luck. In return, you would wish the elders good health, prosperity, and happiness for New Year. At Tết, everyone wears Ao Dai, specifically the colors red and yellow. As well as another way of celebrating the new year is lighting up the firecrackers and gathering to watch and smell it knowing the new year is here.
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However, there is another traditional event as big as Tet in the Vietnamese culture called the Mid-Autumn Festival also known as Trung Thu.
Celebrating the Mid-Autumn festival includes reuniting with friends and family. The traditional dessert you eat during this festival is called Moon cake. It symbolizes family reunion. The children hang vivid lanterns everywhere. It is one of my favorite festivals to celebrate because I get to see family and friends and receive colorful lanterns that light up the sky. It is celebrated in September where the moon is at its roundest and gives the brightest light. My mom told me that back in the day there was no light, and they used the moon as light to reunite with each other. For farmers, they used the full moon to celebrate a successful harvesting season. But what's a festival without music?

Vietnamese music is very unique. It is a very significant part of Vietnamese culture because it reflects their cultural heritage and regional diversity. It is a mix of imperial, ceremonial, folk, hip hop, and rock music. Most Vietnamese music have instruments like plucked strings, bowed strings, winds, and percussion. Vietnamese people love to sing so if you went to Vietnamese parties, you would always hear karaoke in the background.

In conclusion, I am proud to have Vietnamese roots because of their diverse culture. They're many Vietnamese cultures that I love to talk about. I ensure to spread my love for Vietnamese culture to friends and different people in exchange to learn about their culture.



A Bowl of Phở - Watercolor by Anh @atn

My Longest Trip

By Bill Dixon (Vietnam Veteran)

I had finished my basic training and was finishing up Army Engineering School when I received orders to report to the Republic of South Vietnam.

I kissed my wife goodbye, at the airport in North Carolina, and got on the plane for my first plane ride. I had so much apprehension, would my wife be OK, what was war like, what was Vietnam like, did I have it in me what it took to fight in a war, what would I be doing in my year in Vietnam, would I survive my year in Vietnam, would the plane crash, I'm going off to a war in a country I knew nothing about kept repeating in my mind.

Upon landing in California, they herded the group of us onto a bus and off we went to Travis Air Force base. Hey! That's not fair, we are flying on a military plane, sitting backwards facing our duffle bags. You could see all the wires and cables. Everyone I had known going to Vietnam flew on a nice commercial plane with cute flight attendants, our flight attendant was called a loadmaster, and he was not cute.

We flew and then we flew some more, it was a dark stormy night, a lot like the mood inside the plane. The pilot did not help the mood, as we were bouncing around in the storm, he came over the intercom and said, "We are having plane trouble and we are going down," after a long pause, he continued, "we will be landing on Wake Island."

Looking out the small window as the plane landed, all I saw was the runway, water, and the raging storm. There were cots set up for us in a big open hangar, I don't think there was much sleep that night. They worked on the plane all night; at dawn, we take off again, this time for Guam, there they worked on the plane another four hours, and off we go again for Vietnam.

After a while, the pilot came back on the intercom, "We are now in South Vietnamese airspace, and we will be landing at Bien Hoa airbase in the Republic of South Vietnam. When the plane stops, get your A... in gear, grab a duffle bag and get the hell off my plane quickly, the Việt Cộng like to welcome new arrivals to Vietnam by mortaring the runway as the plane lands."

We came straight down, hit the ground hard, bounced a few times and rushed down the runway, made a quick turnaround and finally stopped. The pilot started yelling, "get your crap off my plane now." When the plane door opened everyone paused, the sudden thick sticky humidity, heat and smells came in and hit us with a slap, damn is this what it's going to be like for my entire year.

They herded us hurriedly onto another bus, but this one was different, it had chicken wire over all the windows like a prison bus. I yelled to the driver, "hey driver, are we soldiers or prisoners, what's with the wire over the windows?" He yells back, "Stupid it's so when we go through a village, they can't throw grenades in the windows." That comment struck me, I am now in a real combat zone.

Looking out of the bus, everyone was wearing what looked like black pajamas, how do you tell them apart? I again yelled to the driver, "hey driver, they are all dressed the same, how do you tell the good guys from the bad guys?" Sounding a bit irritated, he

yells back, "it's easy, if they point a rifle at you, they are probably bad guys." The words of my drill sergeant suddenly came roaring into my mind, "Your first day in Vietnam, a short guy wearing black pajamas is going to blow your sorry A.... away." This didn't do much about my apprehension.
I survived my year tour of duty, came home in June 1968, but Vietnam has never left me. I once heard two Vietnam Veterans talking, one asked the other, "when were you in Vietnam?" The other veteran paused a moment and said, "last night." I know how he felt. We made that long trip to Vietnam and the war; our bodies came home, but our minds are still there on that long trip.
Vietnam June 67-June 68
159 Engineer Group
Long Binh Post

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Selfless Suffering

By ARVN Officer Ducem

"*Life holds a potential meaning under any conditions, even the most miserable ones*" .

In retrospect, the six-year lapse of time I experienced in Communist re-education camps makes me strongly believe in what Frankl illustrates about the concept of "tragic optimism".
The Vietnam War, a political involvement of the United States in a very far away probably unknown country to many Americans, came to an end on the day of 30 April 1975, when the surrender to the North claimed by the South Vietnamese president led to the Communist takeover of the South.

Like the other hundred thousand civil servants and military officers who served the American-backed government in the South who could not flee the country, I had to report to the Communist Military Management Committee to be sent to a re-education center to be brain-washed in a training course.

The fear of being executed and the anxiety over the fate of my family outside the center caused a feeling of terror within me on the first day of reporting to that committee.

During the first week, with the very busy moving from one place to another, from one camp to another camp, the fear was lessened in my mind. Time slowly passed, and I had to adapt to the daily activities in camp.

Besides receiving one bowl of rice or cassava every meal, working an eight-hour working day in the field planting rice and corn, or constructing a brick prison for myself
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and others, I had to attend many political classes to brainstorm with others about the crime we had committed while serving the United States policy in Vietnam. We had to plead guilty to the damage, and the destruction we caused to Vietnamese people and our homeland although the fight we had done was a fight for freedom in the South.

The bad malnutrition, the hardship of working many hours in the field, the anxiety over the fate of the family outside the center, the humiliation, the unknown period of our detention in the camp, the repetition of a political philosophy oppressed to our minds made many people collapse.

As an ordinary person, I could not prevent the extreme desperation that sometimes occurred within me. At those moments, I thought that the only way out of this torment was death. Climbing over the fence, running away while working in the field, and being shot by a security guard would be the easiest, the fastest way to get out of this painful situation. But the image of my beloved people: my mother, my wife, and other relatives expecting me to return home helped keep me from wrongdoing. Furthermore, as a religious person, I believed in God and all good things in the concept of Karma philosophy; I had peace of mind when thinking that human life is so precious, and the trial I experienced was the unpleasant consequences of what I had done in the past or even in the past life before this one. The only way to escape from this painful situation is the contentment of endurance under any circumstances, trying to do good things to atone for past wrongdoings. That reason, that meaning helped me to survive through a terrible stage in my life. Frankl illustrates, "*To live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in suffering. If there is a purpose in life at all, there must be a purpose in suffering and dying."*

What Dr. Frankl relied on to survive, to preserve his life through the terrible stage he spent as a long-time prisoner in a bestial concentration camp, is the concept of "*Tragic optimism."* We can explain it as hope, an expectancy, a meaning for life -even the most miserable one. This concept is similar to what I found helped me to endure, to struggle, to survive through a dreadful period that I experienced in the Communist re-education camps. That is what Nietzche states, "*He who has a Why to live can bear with almost any how."*



The RVN military officers registered to attend re-education (labor) camps – after the Fall of Sài Gòn
Photo credit from www.hinhanhlichsu.org

My Mathematic Teaching Journey

When I was in high school, I was better at mathematics than any other disciplines since math is my favorite subject. During that time, the 1960's, calculators were never seen in school so I always used my head to do the basic mathematic operations.

Graduating from high school with a major in mathematics, I continued going to college and finished with a Bachelor of Art degree in business management. I still remember how well I was doing in Statistics and other Business Math courses for my degree. After graduation from college, I believed that I had a strong background in math, so I applied to teach part-time as a high school math teacher along with my main government job.

The Vietnam War happened; I had to quit my career and joined the army to defend my country from the invasion of the Communist Vietnamese from the North. The fall of the South Vietnamese government occurred in April 1975. This caused terrible consequences for many people like me who fought for freedom. Six years in Communist re-education centers is the price that I had to endure. For a long period of time, I never used my brain to think. I had to read and learn a philosophy of Communism oppressed in my mind that I never accepted. The progress of brainwashing made me feel like an idiot since I did not have a chance for logical reasoning.

After six years living in prison, I was lucky to be released and had an opportunity to immigrate to the United States as a political refugee. Coming to the United States in 1991 with nothing in hand but full of the joy of being in a great and free country, I started to rebuild my life from the bottom of American society. With my education background, I was employed by the public school system as a bilingual assistant to help Vietnamese students learn math, science and English. I had difficulty understanding the language and terminology, but after a short period of time I was familiar with the new terms and doing a good job in helping my students learn math. I believe math is a universal language, and no matter what language you speak, if you do the right process, you will come to the right answer. I never thought that I might become a math teacher in the United States before I came to this country, but thanks to the encouragement of some great educators, I went back to school and enrolled at a graduate college to learn a new kind of technology: computer programming. Although it was a totally new language to me, thanks to the mathematical background, I was able to do well in my studies and graduated with a Master of Science degree in computer science education. Upon completion of my computer teaching internship at a high school, I was lucky again to be employed by Saint Petersburg College to help struggling students in mathematics. Everyday, I tutor all levels of college math although I had never learned any math courses in this country.

And again, with the encouragement of some great educators at this college, I was told that as long as I finished my eight math classes, I would have the opportunity to teach math at

this educational institution. And since 2003, after 3 years tutoring math in the Learning Support Commons, I have had a chance to teach developmental math classes as an adjunct. I appreciate all the knowledge that I have learned from all of the instructors I have met, and I know that I will enjoy a new career in helping students learn math as I am doing now. The greatest joy I will have is to see the happy faces of the students who often greet me with the words "thank for your help and that I got a good grade". This makes it all worthwhile.

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The Meaning of My Life

I was born in a poor family in a village near Saigon. My father had left my mother behind along with five children and went to join the Vietminh, the League for Vietnamese Independence, in order to resist the French occupancy over Vietnam. My father was captured and died in a French prison. My mother endured poverty and hardship to take care of her children. When I was six years old, everyday my siblings and I had to wake up at four o'clock in the morning to help my mother set up a grocery stand in the market place about two miles away from my home. Although most people in the village were illiterate, my mother always told us that she had nothing to give us except a chance to go to school, to be educated; only a good education could help us out of poverty and assure us a bright future.

I grew up during the conflict between two different sides of government: Communism in the North and American backed government in the South. As the war was being fought, I continued to study in high school and in college. When I graduated from college, I started working for a United States government agency to help develop the rural area in the district where I was born. I had a good life during that time. Side by side with American advisors everyday, I stayed in the city and did not experience the savagery of the war that was happening in other places. After four years working for the United States agency, I had to join the Vietnamese army to defend my country against the Communist invasion from the North. After going through the military officer academy, I was assigned to work in the National Police Command, the office of the chief special police in Saigon. I had a good position and still did not experience the terrible face of the war, until the day of April 30, 1975 when the Communist took over the South.

As a person who always respected and obeyed commands from a superior officer, I stayed in my position to fulfill my responsibility as a duty officer to the last minute of the war. It was an extreme and very bitter experience for many people like me to find out later that all the commanding officers had left the country some days earlier with the last available transportation. Actually, the South had the ability to fight against the Communist army, but we lost because the army did not have the morale to fight. It was a horrible mess, a
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chaos among the soldiers because there was no leader, no supporting morale since the United States government claimed that the United States would no longer support the military aid to South Vietnam.

The surrender claimed by the South Vietnamese president at that time led to the Communist take over of the South. Like the other hundred thousands of civil servants and military officers who could not flee the country, I had to report to the Communist Military Management Committee and was sent to a re-education center to be brain-washed in a training course. It was a terrible stage in my life. The fear of being executed and the anxiety over the fate of my family outside the center caused a feeling of terror within me on the first day reporting to that committee.

During the first week, we were very busy with moving from one place to another, from this camp to another camp, so fear was lessened in my mind. Furthermore, because of the powerless situation I was in, I decided not to think anymore about what would happen to me or to my family. During most of my free time at night, I prayed to Buddha, to God, and thought back about the things in the past, things I had done wrong or omitted in my responsibility to my mother, or to my family. I promised myself that if I could get out of the camp, I would visit my mother more often, take care of her in a better way, and make her pleased because I was the youngest son in the family, and she loved me the most.

At that time, I was what Carol Pearson refers to as the Orphan because I felt completely powerless in the hands of Communist cadres. I bore the thought that I had done something wrong in the past, that I had enjoyed a selfish life, so I had to experience this trial in my life. I just relied on the power of God to help me get out of this painful situation. Pearson illustrated, "At base is the Orphan's fear of powerless and abandonment, a fear so profound that it usually is not experienced directly. The more apparent emotion is anger – either turned inward in a belief that somehow the Fall is our fault, or else turn outward toward God, the universe, parents, institutions – anything or anyone that can be identified as not properly taking care of them".

During the first six months in the camp, the fear of being executed or being taken away came to my mind anytime I heard the rumor spread throughout the camp that there would be a special punishment or revenge that would apply to anyone who had been involved in the police force or intelligence. Thinking about my background, I thought I would never have a chance to meet my family or to be released.

Besides receiving only one bowl of rice or cassava every meal, and working an eight-hour working day in the field planting rice and corn or constructing a brick prison for myself and others, I had to attend many political classes to brainstorm with others about the political crimes that we had committed while serving the United States policy in Vietnam. We had to plead guilty to the damage, to the destruction we had caused to Vietnamese people and our homeland, although the fighting we had done was a fight for freedom in the South.

Day after day we had to do the same thing, write the same statement about name, rank, serving unit, and about what we had done in the past to cause damage to Vietnamese people when following the United States empire. Communist cadres stated that the more we showed our repentance by stating our mistakes, our crimes, the more we showed our honest desire to be re-educated and to atone for our crimes. Later I learned that the statement each detainee wrote on paper was his own sentence; this statement was the basis for the decision on the length of time he had to stay in camp.

Another way communist cadres judged our re-educating progress was the growth of vegetables planted in the fields. The only fertilizer that was available was human waste full of terrible stinky maggots. We had to use military helmets to scoop them up with our bare hands. Communist cadres implied that the more vegetables grew well, the more chances we had to see our families again.
The bad malnutrition, the hardship of working many hours in the field, the unknown period of time staying in the camp, the repetition of a political philosophy oppressive to our mind made many people collapse. But with a strong faith in God, in all good things, I had peace of mind and hoped for the day I would be returning home.

At this stage, I acted as a wanderer because deep in my mind, I never accepted the oppressive political philosophy forced on me by the Communist cadres, yet I could not express that thinking to anyone. As an honest person, I agonized over the difference between what I thought and what I said, I was lonely in my thinking and hoped for a change that I would never know. As Pearson states, “It was clear to me that the heroism of the Wanderer is not defined by fighting. It is the very act of leaving an oppressive situation and going out alone to face the unknown that is the wanderer’s heroic act – for men and women”.

Gradually I got used to the daily activities in camp. The fear of being killed had left me. After one and half years, Communist cadres allowed us to write to our families (with their censorship), and we began to receive letters from home. The hope for a release increased with the rumor spread about a political settlement, which might occur between the United States government and the Communist one.

Although we were bitter with the feeling that our American allies had betrayed us by abandoning their support while the Communist increased their attacks, we still clung to a vague hope that there would be a political solution for us. That hope gave us the spirit to survive. During almost six years living in prison, I always kept a hope in mind that some day I would be released. But as I had been a United States employee and also a special police officer involved in an intelligence unit, I understood that the day for my release would be very far in future. But it came. On that day I was so surprised. I never thought that I would have that chance. I could not say how much joy I had after many years of expectation. However the happiness of my family reunion, of meeting my mother, my wife and relative did not last long when I had to confront the reality in

life. How were we to survive? How would I be able to find a job to show the Communist cadres that I was busy working and did not have any free time to join any anti-communist activities? The society I lived in for ten years under the Communist regime was a long period of time filled with terror, distrust and oppression. My only wish was to flee the country and to have freedom. When I learned about the program sponsored by the United States government, which gives former detainees a chance to immigrate to the United States, I secretly sent an application to the United States Embassy in Bangkok and later received a Letter of Introduction from the Embassy approving my immigration. This was my final hope of leaving Vietnam after a plan to escape by boat failed. My family lived with that hope in this letter for seven years, until the day we were officially authorized to leave Vietnam.

Coming to the United States in May of 1991, with nothing in hand but filled with the joy of being in a great and free country, we started to rebuild our new life from the bottom of American society.

Although I had to work two jobs, sometimes fourteen hours a day, to survive and to have enough money to support my family, we have enjoyed a great value in life: the freedom so lacking in Vietnam. Here, in this great country, I started a new journey in my life: I work, I study and I raise my children. I teach them the value of hard work and patience, the concept of Karma philosophy. I continually remind them not to forget the hardship we experienced in Việt Nam, to look forward to a bright future by studying hard in school. With my present position as a bilingual assistant, I am happy because I have a chance to help my Vietnamese students with their education in school. Considering them my own children, I always remind them to care for their future by trying their best at school.

After many years suffering from the consequences of the Vietnam War, many years of abandoning books, now I am going back to school to improve my English as well as to gain new knowledge to keep up with progress and new technology. I feel comfortable at this time, and my resolution is that I will never stop learning, never stop improving my intellectual as well as my spiritual life, with a hope that some day I can give back in one way or another something good to make my life have significant meaning once before I die.

At this time I display the qualities of what Carol Pearson[1] calls the Magician because I care for myself, I look the meaning, the wholeness, the truth, especially the progress in my spiritual life. I also care for my children, my family, as well as other students. Pearson states, “Magician see the task is not to be caring of others instead of thinking about oneself, but to learn how to love and care for ourselves as well as our neighbors”

[1] Pearson, Carol S. The Hero Within: Six Archetypes We Live By; Harper San Francisco, 1989

April 30: Memories of My Motherland

By Former Teacher Diệu Thuận

The prisoner of war cried when reading his wife's letter,
Sent from the USA after she and their children successfully escaped and resettled
From her heart and many South Vietnamese's hearts
Still throb, beat in pain, and still hurt…
Listening to the young wife, who painfully left her husband, took her innocent children to find freedom:

Apart and divided by the ocean Pacific…
My fatigued body is here, but my wounded heart still misses
50 years away from Saigon- the Pearl of Southeast Asia, our beloved capital of Việt Nam.

Looking back to my former motherland,
the image of the loving mother fades away
that I have missed dearly nights and days
Looking back on my lost homeland,
my loving father had been long gone.
Remembering the oil lamp my father lit
for me to do homework in war and in peace.

My father tenderly held my hands,
brought me to school, helped me to write, and led me to the young woman I became.
I remember Phan Thanh Gian Boulevard,
Seven years of studying hard
my beloved Gia Long High school
Beautifully stood there under the sun and the moon
with many caring homeroom teachers,
dear friends, classmates, and instructors.

The name of my High School has already changed.

Our homes have been confiscated.
The flag of the Republic of Vietnam with three red stripes on a yellow background no longer exists.
Engraved in my heart, my soul: nostalgic …

Today and forever,

We light the incense and start to chant.
We ring the bell and meditate in our whisper
We pray for the Vietnamese and the lost souls of our motherland,
from the mountains to the rivers,
from the oceans of clear water to the thick bamboo tropical forests:

"*May…*
All Beings will be at peace with joy and happiness
All Beings will be prospered and be safe
All Beings will be free of suffering and hunger"

These are our sincere prayers.
We pray that our younger generations
can go to school and learn the right things with pride and devotion,
about contribution
to our society with honor,
and respect each other
under the Flag of our beloved country:
our pride and dignity.

~~~***~~~
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A Wife of a Vietnamese Prisoner of War – Ink sketch by Anh@atn



The Candles – Oil on canvas by Artist Trương Thị Thịnh



Black April Remembrance Day 2023 at Wounded Warrior Abilities Ranch
Photo by Phương-Lâm Nguyễn

Vietnamese Text: 30 THÁNG 4

Rất xúc động
Những dòng thơ em viết
Không riêng em
Mà của mọi người dân Việt.
Ở bên này
Biển nhớ Thái Bình Duong
Một quê hương
Tan tác mấy dặm trường...
Cờ vàng ba sọc đỏ
Vẫn chờ ngày ngược gió
Đem nhân quyền
Và công lý, tự do.
Ngày ra đi
Người vợ tù son trẻ
Cùng con thơ
Vượt biển mặn, quê cha!
Ngày ra đi
Không một lời từ tạ
Nghĩa mẹ, tình cha
Con chưa kịp đáp đền!
Ngày ra đi
Vẫn biết là diệu vợi
Khung trời nào?
Có giống mái nhà xưa?

Sài Gòn ơi
Bốn mươi tám năm xa xứ
Đã xa rồi!
Hòn Ngọc Viễn Đông!

Tôi nhìn lại quê hương
Nhìn những người chiến thắng
Biến Sài Gòn
Thành hí trường nô lệ
Bốn ngàn năm văn hiến
Xoá mờ bằng tư tưởng Mác Lê!
Tôi nhìn lại quê hương
Đã khuất bóng mẹ hiền!
Và lạc lõng
Giữa khung trời kỷ niệm!
Con đường Duy Tân
Hàng me xanh lưu luyến...

Tôi nhìn lại quê hương
Cha già không còn nữa!
Bông đèn dầu năm xưa
Những ngày con mới đến trường
Cầm tay con
Từng nét chữ thân thương...

Saigon ơi!
Con đường Phan Thanh Giản
Mái trường Gia Long
Bảy năm dài đèn sách
Những thầy cô đã dày công dạy dỗ
Mà hôm nay,
Đám học trò "thất thập cổ lai hi"

Trước cổng trường xưa
Tên không còn nữa
Bóng cờ Vàng đã thành quá khứ!
Lòng nghẹn ngào!
Cho thương nhớ dệt thành thơ...

Saigon ơi!
Hôm nay và mãi mãi
Cho sông núi, quê hương
Cho lũy tre xanh
Bên dòng nước biếc
Cho lời kinh dạt dào tha thiết
Theo nhịp mỏ, hồi chuông
Cho em thơ mỗi sáng đến trường
Được trau dồi lễ nghĩa
Được sống với yêu thương
Để ngày mai, em vun trồng xã hội
Dưới Lá cờ Vàng, lẽ sống Tự D0

Naturalization: The Americanization of Our Name

By Wendy Nhu-Nguyen Duong

Excerpt from the short story/ Novella *The Four Children of A Schooltacher*,
Taken from *Mimi and Her Mirror (*AmazonEncore/Lake Union 2011),
the 2012 Internaitonal Book Award in Multicultural Fiction

Note from the Author: *In this story, the father was a schoolteacher in South Vietnam. He raised four children and lost his fifth child due to his wife's miscarriage. In America, he no longer taught and became the owner of an old shrimp boat. He made his living by renting the boat to Vietnamese shrimpers in the Gulf of Mexico. He commuted between Houston and Galveston for his work with Vietnamese shrimpers. One day, he saw a lost turtle trying to cross the road. He stopped his car to rescue the turtle and took the animal to his home, where he let the turtle live in a sink. He named the turtle "number five," and recited Vietnamese poetry to the turtle every night. Reciting poetry to his children was what the former schoolteacher used to do to in South Vietnam. From this fact, readers can infer that the father was a teacher of Vietnamese literature in his former country, and that in America, the father did not recite Vietnamese poetry to his children again, as he used to do in the old country as a way to put his children to sleep.*

The story establishes for readers that the schoolteacher's four children had all become very successful professionals in America, but apparently their father never returned to the classroom to teach. The old shrimp boat, which has little to do with Vietnamese literature, has replaced the classroom for him. America thus puts an end to his teaching career although it has provided a safe refuge to the schoolteacher and his family. It is not known what has happened to the turtle. Perhaps the turtle's mystery is intended by the author.

The story describes the meeting of the four children at a trendy restaurant where they discuss their planning for their parents' old age. At the meeting, they recall and relive their experience during the naturalization process, which often becomes the opportunity for immigrants to change their name, in a way that hopefully will enable them to become American while still reserving their cultural identity. The excerpt describes what happens.

~~~***~~~

I had to say all this, in defense of my father. Steadfastly, Daddy had refused to reverse his name to conform it to the American way for naturalization. And, he had adopted a turtle to replace Number Five.
~~~

Only I, his first-born girl, understood why.
So, before the immigration authority that day, my father successfully and officially remained Tran Giang Son, the new, middle-aged citizen of the United States of America. Such a great thing he had accomplished! To hold on to the order of how his name should be. at birth!

But his achievement had become our problem. Without the name reversal, my father would be called Mr. Son, while my siblings and I would be called by our family name Tran. People in America would be asking why our father and his children did not have the same last name.

While the four children kept discussing the issue, the immigration interviewer occasionally stuck her head out, calling the name of the next interviewee. We argued and argued, so urgently and earnestly in our staccato, clipped, tonal Vietnamese that the rest of the people who were also waiting for their interviews — Mexicans, Indians, Peruvians, Pakistanis, Iranians, whatever places they were from — were all staring at us. We must have looked like noisy clowns to them.

Amid all of this heated discussion, my mother had retreated to a corner, looking at a *Cosmopolitan* magazine. When I looked at her to seek her opinion, she smiled feebly and said whatever name the immigrant officer would like to call her would be just fine with her.

And then she told me, out of the blue:

"*The sky is blue, and I love America. It is my country."*

For a moment, I was lost.

Then, I caught on: she had practiced the sentence at home so that she could say it perfectly to the immigration officer to demonstrate her English-speaking ability. To impress the immigration officer, my mother had to deliver the sentence in perfect American English, my father had stressed. At the immigration office, my mother was practicing still, apparently in her head.

In this state of emergency, on this important "naturalization" preparation day, my father had slipped into his Vietnamese poetry recitation, and my mother had taken refuge in the practice of her American English. I had to become the take-charge daughter, a literary designer of a last name to solve the "name reversal" dilemma of the day. I turned to my three siblings and announced I would be making the final decision about our last name. We would be taking my father's full name Tran-Giang-Son, hyphenated, meaning *Tran The-Beautiful-Country*, as our last name. That way, in the American way, we would all have the same last name, and as a family, we would be the Tran-Giang-Sons. I turned to *Dr. Tran The-Beautiful-Country* for his approval, but he was still closing his eyes.

He hadn't been back with us yet.

Among the four children, the new family name made sense. First, I had hyphenated my given name for school, turning myself into my initials NN as my first name, so

hyphenating my father's given name into a new family name for all of us was naturally part of my innovative solution. Second, this hyphenation business went well with the territory. After all, in my mind, we were meant to be the new hyphenated Americans: *Vietnamese-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Japanese-Americans, Italian-Americans, Irish-Americans, ecetera ecetera.* The old country and the new country. We should all be "hyphenated" so that the old self and the new self could forever be connected into a single identity.

I reasoned to my siblings that, after all, Giang-Son did sound prettier than Tran. Giang-Son also sounded more Vietnamese, as the Chinese had Tran as a last name as well, so we would be maintaining our Vietnamese cultural identity better by being called "Giang-Son*,"* rather than just "Tran." Further, if the Americans misspelled *Tran*, we would all become *Train*, and that was no good. At least with Giang-Son, we would not run that risk. My logic must have been convincing, since everybody, including my mother, seemed happy with my literary design of a last name. The four children would become Ann-Ann Tran-Giang-Son, Thomas Tran-Giang-Son, Ty-Ann Tran-Giang-Son, and Pierre Tran-Giang-Son.

That was how we were prepared and ready to throw away our old long-winding Vietnamese names, Tran Thanh Nhu-Nguyen, Tran Thanh Dy-Thang, Tran Thanh Thy-Huong, and Tran Thanh Phi-Long, those beautiful, lyrical Vietnamese names with special literary meanings that nobody here understood, names that consisted of foreign words too complicated and too long-winded to be spelled or remembered. Finally, I had solved the matter of name satisfactorily, and we all sat down, at peace, waiting to be called for the interviews.

Unfortunately, as it turned out, the problems of the day in the historical "identity-changing" year of 1980 did not end there.

Cu-Con went in first for the interview. When he got out, he had officially become Pierre Tran-Giang-Son. My mother went next. When she exited the room, she nervously told us what happened.

There emerged the next complication.

During the interview, stressed out by my father's sudden episode of temporary insanity, my mother had broken out crying. The kind-hearted immigration officer, a woman in her twenties, had gently asked my mother why. My mother's self-conscious English was inadequate for her to explain the complex turmoil of the soul, so all my mother could offer was a timid, shorthanded explanation of the last-name business. She managed to explain that in the old country of Vietnam, a married woman could retain her maiden name. My mother had had the same name all her life, a vestige of her royal heritage. Yet that day she was all ready and prepared to change her full name from the long-winded Cong Tang Ton Nu Mi-Suong to Suong Tran-Giang-Son, to conform herself to the American way and to be properly identified as Mr. Tran-Giang-Son's lawfully wedded wife. Apparently, the immigration officer thought the name change had made my mother cry. So, she zealously pursued the mission to help my mother maintain her long-

winded Vietnamese name. She told my mother that in America, no citizen could be forced to change or reverse her name against her wish, and women, in particular, could make their own decisions, especially on such a personal matter as her last name. Women in America could retain their family name even if they were married. My mother was indeed intimidated by the interviewer's long and forceful explanation of what America was about on the issue of names, but in the end, my mother got the message. The bottom line was, according to the immigration officer, my mother did not have to be called Mrs. Son instead of Mrs. Suong, simply to please her husband or to become American. In America, a woman could be whatever she wanted to be.

The officer (not knowing she had unintentionally added to our family's identity crisis) also pointed out to my mother, conveniently and casually, the terrible disadvantage of adopting my father's last name, *Son*, even in the compounded, hyphenated form as *Tran-Giang-Son*. People in America would call my mother *Mrs. Son*. In English, *son* meant a male child. In the worst case, someone in America might even call my mother *Mama San*, instead of Mrs. Giang-Son, or Mrs. Tran-Giang-Son. *Mama San*: that stereotypical and derogatory way of referring to an old Asian woman! My mother would not like that. On the other hand, my mother's own name, Suong, could be akin to *swan,* a beautiful and ethereal word referring to an elegant species. There was a huge difference between *son* and *swan.*

Facing the unpleasant possibility of *Mrs. Son* or *Mama San* versus the beautiful image of a *swan*, in a split second and without further ado, my timid mother triumphantly said yes when the officer asked if she wanted to keep her old name.

So, thanks to the feminist officer, when my mother emerged from the interview room, this new citizen of *America the Beautiful,* timid and disoriented still, had remained proudly as *Mrs. Cong Tang Ton Nu Mi Suong,* the royal name she was born with—a testament to my mother's freedom of choice and feminist spirit in her new country. The new citizen of America who emerged from behind the door of the interview room that day was Mrs. Cong TTNM Suong, wife of Mr. Tran Giang Son, and mother of Ann-Ann, Thomas, Ty-Ann, and Pierre Tran-Giang-Son.

By then, the whole system of consistency I had devised for the last name business had collapsed, because our father was Mr. Son, my mother was Mrs. Suong, and their first-born daughter, me, is Ann-Ann Tran-Giang-Son. After all this work and discussion, we still ended up with different last names.

Back to square one. And the discussion started all over. All eyes in the room were on us again. We, the quarreling bunch, received all the hostile attention and intense curiosity of our fellow aliens.

Amid that heated and loud argument, the immigration supervisor —the big boss — stepped out, his six-foot-five body gigantic next to us.

"What's the problem here?" The giant cleared his throat, and we all quickly fell silent.

I caught my mother's frightened eyes. I could tell she was panicking, perhaps fearing that the giant would take her new citizenship away, and gone, too, was her dream to bring her parents to America. I could see her frail and skinny frame tremble, as though the glossy *Cosmopolitan* were withering in her hand, and her fragile frame withering with it.

"*The sky is blue, and I love America. It is my country*," she mumbled to the giant.

"Say what?" the giant raised his chestnut brows.

The crowd of aliens roared.

Timidly, my mother laughed too, with self-consciousness spelled across her reddened sweet face. I caught her very sad eyes, as though they were ponds of water darkened at sunset. I knew what the sadness was about. Her parents, old and ill, were on the other side of the ocean.

The sadness of eternity, because life separation is the equivalent of death.

The giant disappeared behind the door.

Once again, in a burst of inspiration I arrived at another literary solution for our innovative family name system. Since our parents bear different last name on their naturalization certificates, the two sons could choose to be Tran-Giang-Son, and the daughters could choose Tran-Giang-Suong, taking on my mother's beautiful first name, Suong, which could sound like Swan, *or* Sean. In Vietnamese, Suong meant "dew." Giang-Suong meant "river and dew," as opposed to Giang-Son, meaning river and mountain." So, the men would be "river and mountain, the beautiful country," and the women would be "river and dew"—misty dew over a river, still the poetic image of a beautiful country. I was being my romantic and creative self, proud that I had managed to hold on to our literary heritage. Giang-Son for boys, and Giang-Suong for girls. Again, this new rule for names made perfect sense.

It was then that Cu-Con exploded. He said he had legally become Pierre Tran-Giang-Son and that was the end of it. All of this embarrassing discussion was the result of my father's nonsensical approach to the legalization of his own name on the piece of paper called the naturalization court order. After all, Cu-Con did not care if he was called *Mr. Son* or *Mr. Daughter.*

The wait and the processing went on. At some point in time, the door opened again for the last time, and I helped myself inside the interview room. The six-foot-five giant supervisor followed me and the door was shut behind him. He showed me to the interview room, and I met the feminist officer who was responsible for my mother's keeping her full name intact in America. *Cong Tang Ton Nu My Suong.* Who in America would remember a name that has six foreign words?

When I walked out of the interview room, I had become Ann-Ann Suong Tran-Giang-Son, keeping all words and hyphenating them properly in the right places. My new name also had six words to rival against my mother's. Ann-Ann replaced my Vietnamese initial NN for my first name. I kept my mother's given name "Suong" as a middle name for myself. I took my father's full Vietnamese name, Tran-Giang-Son, as my hyphenated family name. I liked my new name, although it was kind of…too long. When I couldn't decide what to throw away from my wardrobe, I kept everything even if I never wore a piece again. The extraordinary length of my legal name simply meant that in my head, I had managed to maintain all of my identities, or at least gather them all into the same drawer even if I didn't have enough space. The interviewing immigrant supervisor had asked why I wanted such a long name. "Why not something like Ann Smith or Kate Hall, you mean?" I asked her back, making up the shortest hypothetical names I could quickly imagine as examples.

Couldn't I be Ann Smith or Kate Hall? I couldn't help blurting out to her. The possibility was as alien as our alienness in *America The Beautiful*.

"Mine is a complicated family, with complicated history, a complicated place where we came from," I hurriedly added, not wanting her to think "Ann Smith" or "Kate Hall" was my improper satire. The immigration supervisor nodded understandingly, and my new name was sealed.

I had indeed been the last one to walk through the door for my interview with that feminist immigration officer. I had found out that she was a graduate of Smith College, where all the feminist students in America congregated (so she proudly claimed). She congratulated me on my new name and identity. In her enthusiasm, the officer even suggested:

"If your name could be shorthanded as Suong-Giang, those two words would sound like Sean Young, the beautiful Hollywood actress! How convenient, and maybe you will become famous as people mistake you for Sean Young of Hollywood. At least you have black hair like her."

I thanked the immigration officer for her innovative idea of coming up with a pen name, screen name, or stage name for me. The suggestion stuck with me as I walked out of the interview room, thinking of me as Suong Giang, literally meaning 'the river of dew," pronounced as Sean Young in America.

No, I could never be Sean Young of Hollywood. I was only my mother's river of dew of Vietnam, her singing nightingale.

I shook my head to erase the beginning of a dream, considering it out of reach.

After the arduous paper processing, we were sent home to await a court date for our sworn-in ceremony, when we would be pronounced as the new citizens, pledging our allegiance to America before a federal district judge.

On the way back home, we had no more discussion on the matter of name. My mother was happy that the immigrant officer had warmly praised her for making up her own

mind and speaking beautiful English. "*The sky is blue, and I love America*," my mother had delivered the sentence perfectly. My father seemed most pleased, and I understood why. Things had gone well. On the historic day, despite the ordeal regarding our name change, no real disaster had occurred, and my father had gotten his way: he did not have to reverse his name like that poor poet. After all, Vietnamese or American, at least in name he was still Dr. Tran Giang Son, the college professor in Vietnam, and not what he had become in America in the late 1970s, the small-town entrepreneur whose shrimp boat broke down all the time because it was so old, so old that it was used by no other shrimpers in the Gulf but the newly arrived, penniless Vietnamese who couldn't speak a word of English. Perhaps in Daddy's mind, his children were still bearing those literarily beautiful Vietnamese names he had carefully selected in consultation with our sophisticated maternal grandparents, *Ông Bà Ngoại,* who came from a "mandarin" descent. In that mandarin tradition, we were honored by names that came from a highly sophisticated ancient Vietnamese dictionary, all speaking for our ancestors' status as "Vietnamese literati."

In a way, no matter what we were called in America on paper, we were always the four children of a Vietnamese schoolteacher.

But my story of our naturalization interview day was never just about the ultimate Americanization of a name. Something else stuck in my brain. As we left the federal building in downtown Houston in 1980, all I felt was a vague sense of sadness, the kind that disturbingly lingered because I could not articulate its cause. The sadness grew as I looked back at the building where our papers would be processed.

What I saw behind me was impersonal. All I could see was the gray facade of a concrete building.

Just a building!



Downtown New York – Photo by Anh @atn

After 50 years of living In America, I still don’t know I am Vietnamese or American

By Nhung Lam

Year 2025: this year.
Number 2025 reminds me that I have lived in the United States for nearly 50 years, twice as many years as I had lived in Vietnam. Now, even though I have been an American citizen for nearly 40 years, every time I think back, I still don’t know I am Vietnamese or American.

Year 1975: 50 years ago.
Number 1975 reminds me of 1/3 of my unstable life in Vietnam. Born in one city, grew up and attended 12 years of high school in many different cities, then went to another city to attend college. After graduating from college, moved to Saigon, the capital of Vietnam, to work, get married, and have my first child. Three years later, when the Vietnamese Communist took over the country, I brought my husband and children to the US on April 30 of 1975, with the helps of my parents and siblings.

So if anyone asked me which city in Vietnam I had lived before, I wouldn't know how to answer.

From 1975 to 2000: the first 25 years.
During the 25 years from 1975 to 2000, I only had one choice, which was to stay in the US and become an American. We settled in a city of Florida state. My husband was a monogamous man with one wife, one job, one house, and one city; therefore, sometimes when I suggested moving to another state, he strongly objected. So we started our new life here by going to school, getting a job, and raising our children. Then we bought a house, became American citizen, and to this day, I still live in the house I have lived for 25 years.

As the days passed, I realized that I had never been an American.

At home, I spoke Vietnamese. At work, everyone did their own job, so I didn't need to speak much English, and even if I did, few people would understand. Sometimes, I had to write or spell out what I was saying so they would understand what I was saying. On weekends, instead of going to happy hours with my colleagues, I went fishing or dancing with my Vietnamese friends. On Sundays, I went to a Vietnamese church to see myself living like a Catholic in Vietnam.

I realized that I was a Vietnamese, and I had nothing to do with the Americans around me.

Yet, on a trip to Vietnam where I brought my entire family to let my children know their original relatives, we were welcomed by both relatives and strangers who treated us as if we were foreign guests. My children's grandmother called my children American kids. Relatives who came to visit called us Việt Kiều (a term used to refer to Vietnamese people living abroad). In their eyes, I saw that they no longer considered us Vietnamese.

A few years later, I returned to Vietnam again to find the places where I had grown up and lived before. However, I could not find anything from the old days. The familiar streets had changed their names. The old places were filled with houses of immigrants from the North. My old friends also moved away. The landscapes had changed so much that, when I left Vietnam to go back to US this time, my memories of Vietnam were still memories of 25 years ago.

I came back to America and felt like I was an American.

From 2000 to 2015: the next 15 years.
These 15 years were the time I lived like an American. My new job required me to speak and write more English. I even registered to vote. I began to know the names of the governor and two senators of my state. In 2004, my husband died of illness, then my children graduated from schools and left home to build their own lives. I had more time for myself. I read books and listened to the news more. I could drive on the freeway by myself. My children joked: "If we want to get somewhere early, let mom drive the car."

I lived like an American.

From 2015 to 2025: the last 10 years.

I thought I would be an American forever, until one time I went to visit my granddaughters. I was in the room and heard my two granddaughters calling: "Bà ngoại come here" (Bà ngoại is grandma in Vietnamese). I walked out, they pointed at the TV and said: "This is for you." I went closer and saw that they were watching Mulan, a Disney animated film about the life of a Chinese girl. A few months later, one of my granddaughters called and asked for my personal information: how I grew up, how I came to America, where I learned English, what kind of music I like. I asked her why she wanted to know. She said, “I have to do school projects, and my project this time is “my Bà ngoại.”

She reminded me that I am not American.

Most recently, when our Catholic Community began buying cemetery land to establish a Vietnamese cemetery, this part of cemetery became more bustling. Every year on All Souls Day in early November, there is a Vietnamese mass here. Every time someone in the community passes away, everyone goes to this funeral home to pray, goes to the church to attend the funeral mass, then sees the deceased off to his/her burial plot in this cemetery.

Once, while helping to interpret for a Vietnamese man who bought a plot in this cemetery, he said: "You can live anywhere when you are alive, but when you die, you must have a grave for yourself." I thought it made sense, so I bought a plot in this cemetery, planning to bring my husband's ashes here, and later I can be buried next to him and to my fellow Vietnamese people.

You see:

"I am American, but I think like Vietnamese".



Statue of Liberty – Photo by Anh @atn



Identities – Watercolor by Anh 2017@atn

Boat People

By Anh Truong-Nguyen



"Enlightenment" – Acrylic by Anh 2009 @atn [2]
Hoa Khai Kiến Phật Ngộ Vô Sanh

Em ở nơi đâu hỡi cô gái?
tên của em được gọi
"Thuyền Nhân"
trên đường đi gặp hải tặc bao lần?
theo giòng đời nổi trôi số phận...
gắn liền tên em
"Nước Việt Buồn"

em giờ này ở nơi chốn mãi mãi
nấm mồ em là dưới đáy đại dương?
sóng trắng xóa bao loài hoa dại
gót chân xưa nhẹ bước thiên đường...

nơi em đến sẽ không còn đau khổ
không oán thù, không danh lợi chen đua
chốn trần gian mấy ai giác ngộ
ý thức hệ vẫn mãi hơn thua...

trong tiếng gió thì thầm khe khẽ
lời kinh cầu vọng tiếng "*nam mô*"
trong tiếng nấc nghẹn ngào của mẹ
nguyện cầu em an lạc
cõi hư vô...

Where are you, young lady?
you're called a
"Boat People"
how many times did you encounter pirates?
your life drifted away
attached to your name's
"War-torn Việt-Nam"

you're in the eternal land
your grave's the abyss of the ocean

[2] Ánh made this painting dedicated to her friend's late sister, who escaped Việt Nam by boat in the late 1970s and had been missing mysteriously. The whole boat disappeared and devoured by the ocean. The Buddhists believe innocent people would reach enlightenment by purely reborn from a lotus and have no more suffering.

the white waves like the wildflowers
your footsteps lighten in heaven
no suffering at your destination
and no hatred, fame, and competition
how many fools understood
but still fought for their ideology…

the wind carried the whispering
"*Nammo*" was the chanting
in your mother's choking sobs
praying for your peace
in the realm of nothingness – with a pure white wreath



Thought of a Lost Soul under the Ocean - Oil on canvas by Artist Trương Vũ



Sufferings' Remembrance in the Night - Oil on canvas by Artist Trương Vũ

The Legacy and Spirit of the Yellow Flag with Three Red Stripes and "The Call of Citizens"[3] Before 1975

a. The Birth of Our National Symbols

Before March 9, 1945, when Japanese forces overthrew French colonial rule, Vietnam had neither a national flag nor an official anthem to call its own. However, on April 17, 1945, with the formation of the Tran Trong Kim government, the Li Trigram flag (featuring a broken yellow center stripe) was adopted as Vietnam's first true national flag. Initially, this flag represented only northern and central Vietnam, as Japanese authorities had not yet returned the southern territories to Hue's administration. On August 14, 1945—just days after Japan's surrender—this flag became the unifying emblem of Vietnam's three regions, accompanied by the patriotic song Vietnam, the Pearl of the Eastern Sky by composer Hung Lan.

However, this brief moment of national unity was soon shattered. On August 19, 1945, the Viet Minh, under Ho Chi Minh's leadership, seized power, discarding these national symbols in favor of the Red Flag with a Yellow Star and "The Army March" by Van Cao. Soon after, Ho Chi Minh signed the Preliminary Franco-Vietnamese Agreement on March 6, 1946, allowing French forces to return—not to protect Vietnam, but to eliminate nationalist opposition. It was only after years of war that the French government, recognizing the resilience of the Vietnamese nationalists, negotiated with Emperor Bao Dai to restore Vietnam's independence within the French Union.

On June 2, 1948, under the leadership of General Nguyen Van Xuan, the Provisional Government of Vietnam adopted a new national flag: the Yellow Flag with Three Red Stripes, designed by renowned artist Le Van De. This flag symbolized Vietnam's unity and sovereignty, and along with it, Luu Huu Phuoc's Call of Youth was adapted into The Call of Citizens, a song that would become the enduring national anthem of the Republic of Vietnam. Later, in 1956, the First Republic of Vietnam, led by President Ngo Dinh Diem, officially preserved The Call of Citizens as the anthem of the free Vietnamese people.

b. The Symbolic Meaning of Our Flag and Anthem

As Professor Nguyen Ngoc Huy eloquently stated:

"In our ancestors' wisdom, yellow represents earth, and red embodies fire. Fire nurtures earth, creating a perfect harmony. The three red stripes resemble sunbeams warming the vast earth below, signifying new life and prosperity."

"The yellow field represents the unity of the Vietnamese nation, while the three red stripes symbolize the three regions of Vietnam—North, Central, and South—reinforcing the notion that Vietnam is one unified country."

For nearly three decades, from 1948 to 1975, the free people of Vietnam and the courageous soldiers of the Republic of Vietnam defended these symbols with their lives. Their fight was not for ideology or political gain, but for the ideals of freedom, democracy, and human dignity. By contrast, the Red Flag with Yellow Star and "The Army March" represented the Communist Party's rejection of nationalism, religion, and family values, replacing them with an oppressive Marxist-Leninist dictatorship.

[3] South Vietnam National anthem: Tiếng Gọi Công Dân – by composer Lưu Hữu Phước

Vietnamese Folk Tale: The Mountain God and The Lord of The Waters Sơn Tinh - Thủy Tinh[4]

the snow blankets outside whitening the scene
a grandma is holding her granddaughter and telling
the Vietnamese folk tale of Sơn Tinh and Thủy Tinh
the fireplace keeps them warm as they have been

across the Ocean Pacific
with a husky voice the grandma looks beyond past
to a far away land called Việt Nam
tells a story of a four-thousand-years civilization

king Hùng Vương has a daughter named Mỹ Nương
she's at the age to marry and is ready
so, the King is searching for her a husband
- a prince with power and talents.

"who brings the best dowry
and is an unspeakable ability
above anyone in this country
he will be married to my lovely princess"

the deity Sơn Tinh lives on the mountain.
all the animals are his loyal citizens.
his power is moving land and rivers
making mountains touch heaven.
"I promise to love your daughter
and bring her happiness forever!"

the deity Thủy Tinh is the Aqua king.
his people are sea creatures.
they obey and worship his power
he can conquer all lands and cover them with water!

[4] Sơn Tinh (Mountain God) -Thủy Tinh (Lord of the Waters) is a Vietnamese myth that explains the practice of tidal irrigation and devastating floods in Vietnam as a result of monsoon. In the early 18th century King Hùng Vương married off his daugter Mỹ Nương to one of the suitors and caused the current typhoons and floods.

"i vow to be the best husband
who will pamper his wife and always loyal"

king Hùng Vương is very pleased
but, he has only a princess to give away to one.
so, he makes his decision:

"*who can come here early*
bringing the best and unique dowry
I will give my daughter to him immediately!"

When dawn breaks Sơn Tinh arrives
bringing his exquisite presents to his bride
all the rare, scented woods and exotic birds
and he receives the king blessings to marry Mỹ Nương

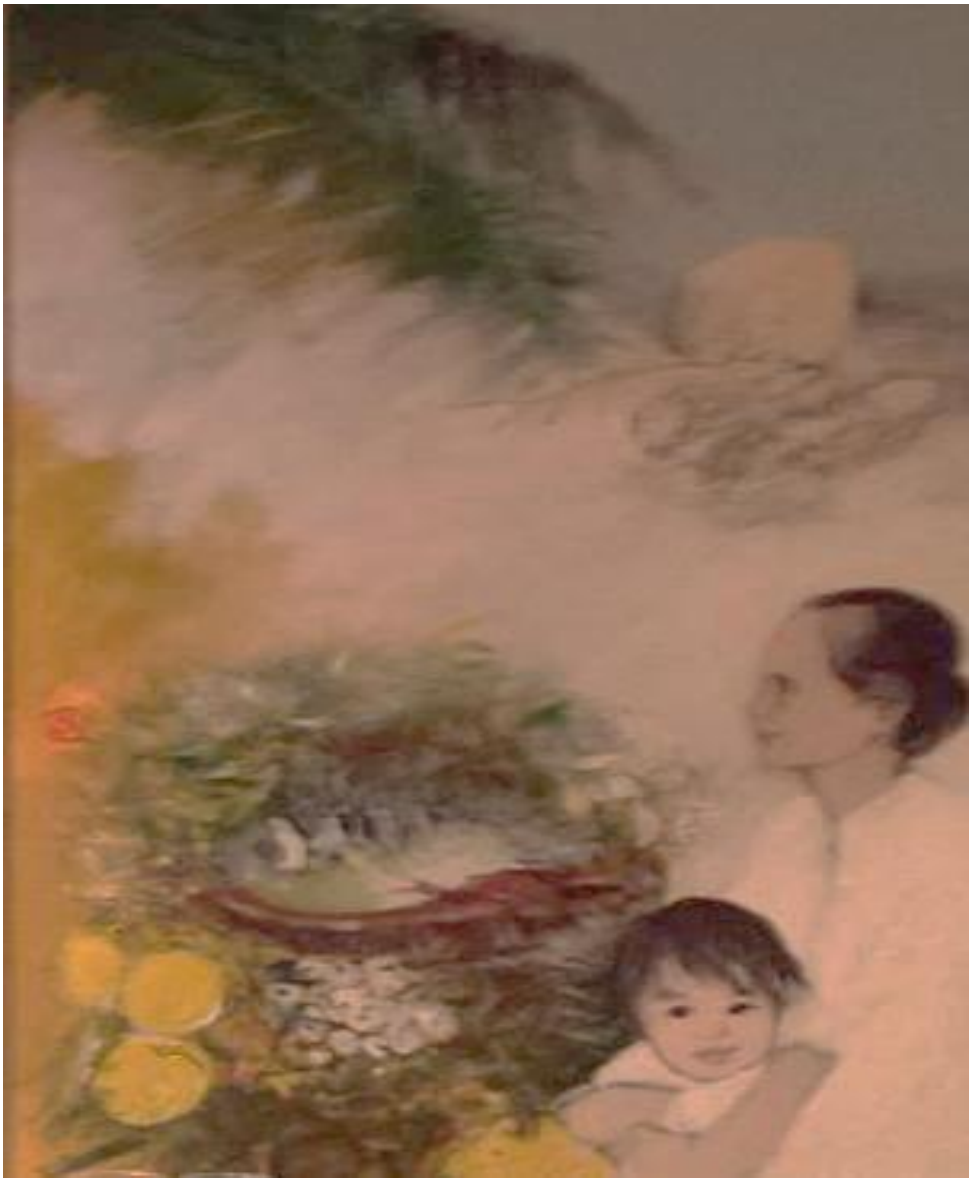
Thủy Tinh later brings the pearls and the unique presents
all the treasure from his kingdom
but Thủy Tinh has been late just a few second
Mỹ Nương and Sơn Tinh have been gone.
the newly wedded leave the king alone
and go toward the mountain they will happily live.

Thủy Tinh follows the princess and chases them
by raising the water from his oceans
Sơn Tinh uses his power to move the mountains
up and up above the water line

so, every year we have hurricanes
because Thủy Tinh still goes after his future bride
he transforms into the dragon spitting water on the sky
making people suffer in land!

the grandma's voice's melancholic
on her lap her granddaughter soundly sleeps
In her dream she's the princess
who happily lives in the forest

the relationship of three generations
bonded by the grandmother to her grandchildren
through the beloved Vietnamese's folk tales,
the myths and histories passing on
from the grandmotherly love of the country war-torn…



Grandma and Me "Story Times"- Oil on canvas by Artist Võ Đình[5]

[5] Võ Đình - a famous Vietnamese Writer and artist was born in 1933, in Huế. In the 1950s, he studied abroad in Lyon and Paris. In 1961, the first painting exhibition was held in New York City; Since then, there have been more than 40 solo exhibitions and countless group exhibitions in Europe, Asia, Canada, and the United States. He painted and gifted this painting to the mother of artist Trương Vũ.

Vietnamese Text: Sơn Tinh - Thủy Tinh

Tuyết rơi rơi phủ đầy trắng xóa
cạnh lò sưởi bà cháu bên nhau,
ngồi trong lòng cháu nghe bà kể
chuyện tích xưa, huyền thoại đã lâu...

ở bên kia Thái Bình Dương vạn dặm
giọng bà trầm, mắt dõi xa xăm
ôi Việt Nam ... nơi xa xôi lắm
nền văn hiến hơn bốn ngàn năm

vua Hùng Vương có nàng công chúa
tên Mỹ Nương tới tuổi cặp kê
nên Vua Hùng đang tìm kén rể
ra lệnh truyền tìm kiếm hiền tài

"ai đem được những vật sính lễ và tài năng xuất chúng quần hào thì người người đó sẽ là phò mã được sính duyên con gái của ta."

thần Sơn Tinh vốn ở trên núi
muôn thú rừng thần phục vua rừng
có biệt tài lấp sông dời đá
nâng núi kia "đội đá vá trời"
"thần xin hứa yêu thương công chúa
mang cho nàng hạnh phúc đời đời!"

thần Thủy Tinh là vua của biển
bao nhiêu loài sinh sống hải cung
đều thần phục tài năng vua Thủy
ngài dâng nước san bằng các vùng!
"thần sẽ là người chồng tuyệt mỹ
cưng chìu vợ và sẽ thủy chung"

vua Hùng Vương thoả lòng đắc dạ
nhưng khốn nỗi chỉ có một nàng
nên truyền lệnh Sơn Tinh, Thủy Tinh

"sáng mai ai tới sớm
mang sính lễ đầu tiên nhận vợ
thì công chúa sẽ gả cho ngay!"

Ngày hôm sau Sơn Tinh tới trước
đem báu vật tê giác sừng nai
cùng trầm hương các loài chim quý
đến cung đình nhận vợ Mỹ Nương

Thủy Tinh đem lưu ly mã não
bao châu báu nơi chốn vương cung
nhưng Thủy Tinh - thần đã chậm trễ
Mỹ Nương theo bước của Sơn Tinh
đã về dinh kết nghĩa chồng vợ
cùng thần núi nơi chốn sơn khê

Thủy Tinh đuổi theo nàng công chúa
dâng sóng cao nước ngập đồng bằng
Sơn Tinh đem tài năng hoá phép
nâng đất cao vượt khỏi nước kia

và cứ thế hàng năm dậy sóng
Thủy Tinh đang tìm kiếm Mỹ Nương
hoá thành rồng trên cao phun nước
làm dân tình khốn khổ bao đường!

giọng của bà đều đều ấm áp
dựa lòng bà cháu ngáp ngủ ngon
trong cơn mê cháu là công chúa
đang hạnh phúc sống ở trên non

hai bà cháu - qua ba thế hệ
sống nơi nào cũng nhớ về nguồn
chuyện cổ tích nước Việt yêu thương
thắm tình bà-cháu hai dòng máu
trải bao đời qua mấy đoạn trường…

In the Name of Liberation

Minh's frown caught the teacher's attention. Like other students from the south of Vietnam, Minh was forced to learn a new way of life under the communist regime, but she could not fathom why the North Vietnamese were so fanatic. She patiently tried to listen to her teacher but anxiously wanted to ask a question. The young but with the ancient and unfriendly look raised her northern voice to another octave like a witch's sound. "Stalin, oh, Stalin, I love you ten times more than I love my parents… You must memorize this poem that Tố Hữu[6] wrote when Stalin died. Do you have any questions, Minh?"

Minh relaxed her facial expression and stood up. "Yes, teacher. I don't understand why someone can love Stalin ten times more than his parents. Tố Hữu never lived with or knew Stalin. His parents loved and raised him. Would he love his parents more than love a stranger?"
The witch showed her anger. "Insolent! You and other Southerners do not know anything about the principles of communism. You should be kept in the re-education camp to learn more. We communists do not believe in family, religion, or patriotism. All communists are [7]our family and beliefs. We fought the French, the Americans, and any capitalists because we wanted to make the whole world red. Only communism can bring happiness and fairness to this earth." Minh became furious inside but stayed calm. "Without the support and love of a family, how can one exist and survive? Without faith, one will have no strength to admit mistakes and try to correct them. I would be a hypocrite if I said that I love Mr. Stalin more than I love my parents. May I not memorize and recite this poem, teacher? I believe a poem must be words that bring up the beauty of language and express true love."

The teacher could no longer tolerate Minh's insolence. Her eyes seemed to shoot blood, and she snarled loudly in a high pitch, showing all her teeth, like a mad dog. "You must memorize this poem, or I will put your name on the blacklist and report you to the president."

Minh sighed and quietly sat down. After all, we- the former citizens of the Republic of Vietnam, had given up our rights and freedom, for the North had won and overused the phrase *In the Name of Liberation* to control everyone. What could she do but

[6] Tố Hữu: a politician and poet of North Vietnam, who was famous in the Land Reform 'Terror' program, accused his parents as evil landlords and later buried them alive in front of "People Court" to prove his loyalty to the Communist Party.

dispassionately recite those empty words from what, in the view of the North, was praised and called a "poem"? Yes, she would perform like a parrot, but no one could brainwash Minh or replace her belief in faith and love.
The communists' popular phrase *In the Name of Liberation* had taken away the freedom of the South Vietnamese. Minh sighed. At fourteen, she understood that she no longer had a country. Her beloved Republic of Vietnam was gone - just like her youth and her future.

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Liberty

Give me freedom or give me death
The words engraved in my head
At fourteen, what have I learned?
Violence, lies, and hatred!
I must applaud until I am exhausted!
I shall remain cool while I am hot…
I must smile
when I truly want to cry!
What kind of ideology may change me?
May I become a deceiver
Like those members
Of the so-called communist party?
Give me death or give me liberty…
I want to fly away
Out of this classroom today
I don't want to listen to this hypocrite
Who only learns to blindly teach
Does she know about poetry?
Has she ever been happy?
When will the words open her soul
Allow her to see
Beyond herself and understand true love,
Joy, peace, and tranquility…?

~~~***~~~

Minh's Diary

"Socialist Republic of Vietnam – Independence – Liberty – Happiness"

The truck was loaded with people. Minh recognized a few faces. The sun rose quickly; the heat was unbearable. The miserable journey lasted almost a day. When it finally stopped, late afternoon, two policemen opened the door and allowed the "defendants" out. The bright light hurt her eyes. She tried to guess the location; only mountain and rice fields surrounded her view. The group was herded inside a compound. A few thatched roofs and clay buildings were divided by several wired fences. A guard ordered everyone to stand in two lines to receive new uniforms and informed them that this was a labor camp. No one knew for how long; but everyone knew, for sure, that the future looked doomed. Claire was only fifteen. Her youth would be spent in this labor camp! She became irritated. Her mind changed from fear to anger. For the first time in her life, she experienced "Hatred." Her heart burned with hatred. She would never want to be a Vietnamese in her life! She made a vow not to live in this country again – some days she would escape this camp and Vietnam. She hated the communists to her bone.

Minh withstood life in the labor camp for almost two years, then successfully escaped the country four years later. She resettled in the United States, finished college, lived happily, and erased most of the darkest times in her life from her memories.
In finding peace, Minh attended a few retreats, looked into her soul, and started writing her diary again.

At Dhamma Siri Vipassana Meditation Center

Day One
I must put aside the past. Nothing will make me frightened again. I am in this dark room to meditate and learn about myself. Fear is just one of my feelings that are formed by my mind and imagination. I must conquer it. I must get back to my breathing and study my body, mind, senses, and reactions to my senses.

Day Three
I start to concentrate on the flow of inhaling and exhaling, observing my body and feelings. My heart rate slows down. My mind becomes calmer. I feel neither suffocated nor afraid of the darkness. Hatred and anger disappear. Life is temporary. All things come and go. This, too, shall pass. Let it go!

Day Five

Peace or happiness arrives when I accept and tolerate what has happened. I am the only one who can create peace and tranquility. I will not let the past make me suffer. And the reality is what I experience each moment. Change is constant. Whether the environment is pleasant or unpleasant, expected or unexpected, long or short. I am still who I am -still happily breathing and enjoying life!

Day Seven

Day Seven The intense meditation schedule, starting from 5 A.M. to 9 P.M, and the strict vegetarian diet, only two meals a day, is a very tough initiation. However, after seven days, I felt more comfortable practicing meditation in the small dark room the master assigned me.

My stomach no longer growls loudly at night when I am in bed.

My mind is not wandering with worries, desires, and depression; negative feelings are gone. Curiosity regarding meditation had been satisfied. I feel so peaceful. I don't pine for anything but view the world differently and become more mindful. I appreciate each moment that I breathe.

Day Ten

To balance the passive activity of sitting quietly for twelve hours each day, I walk and practice kickboxing during my break after lunch from 12:30 P.M to 2 P.M. I love the path near the pond lined with straight tall pine trees surrounded by a lush, mixed, landscape of purple tropical cannas and bluebonnets. As I look at the tranquil pond, in all its serene natural beauty, I momentarily allow myself to pine over the loss of my beloved father and daughter. However, I come back to reality, return to the technique of meditation, and silently pray for their happiness and peace.

Life, after all, is a journey that I must continue.

Will I meet my loved ones again after life?

This is the last day of the retreat. In a few more hours she will be back to her normal activities.

Minh breathes, appreciates, and concentrates on the present, and focuses on her praying.

"May my sons be safe and blessed with a comfortable life and freedom in the best country in the world. May all be content and be freed from suffering."

Peace and Serenity

when my mind is empty
nothing can make me worry
when I can stop walking
to enjoy the beautiful scenes
when I don't want to rush
But slowly I admire the wild rose buds
and love to breathe in the scent
of mixed flowers and many plants.

An Bình và Thanh Tịnh

khi tâm tôi trống vắng
không có chi làm tôi lo lắng
khi tôi có thể dừng chân
thưởng thức cảnh chung quanh
khi tôi không vội vả
chậm rãi ngưỡng mộ những nụ hường
và yêu thích ngửi những mùi hương
quyện giữa loài hoa và cây cỏ

when I can close my eyes
let my vision bloom with picturesque sight
the seagulls soar on the vast colorful sky
the sun slowly sets

the melancholy waves

chant the lovely ballads that lovers have sang for centuries…

that's serenity.

khi tôi nhắm mắt nhè nhẹ thở
tâm thức tôi nở rộ cảnh đẹp như tranh vẽ tô
hải âu bay lượn trên trời cao đầy sắc màu
hoàng hôn chầm chậm buông
những con sóng lặng lẽ u sầu

hát bản tình ca yêu dấu người yêu nhau
hát trong nhiều thế kỷ…

Đó là sự thanh thản yên bình ý vị



Sunset – Photo by Anh @atn

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The One-Eyed Lieutenant

By Phạm Phan Lang

Editor's Note: *Ms. Phạm Phan Lang is a retired Lieutenant Colonel of the U.S. Army. She currently resides in Oahu, Hawaii, and Huntington Beach, California. She is well-known as a poet in the Vietnamese American communities and internationally. Many of her poems have been set to music and posted on YouTube. Ms. Lang left Vietnam on the night of April 29, 1975, aboard the warship captained by her husband, with her three young children and her elderly parents-in-law. She is a former student of Võ Tánh High School in Nha Trang, Vietnam, from which she graduated in 1969. She earned a bachelor's degree in Nutrition Dietetics from the University of Maryland in 1980 and joined the U.S. Army as a Second Lieutenant that same year. She completed the U.S. Army Dietetics Internship Program in 1981 and received a Master of Arts in Management & Leadership from Webster University in 1985. Tragically, her husband passed away in an accident while trying to rescue four drowning children during a beach vacation in South Carolina. Ms. Lang served in the U.S. Army for 22 years, from 1980 to 2002, and became the first Vietnamese female Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Armed Forces.*

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One of the funny stories from my military life is about my shooting practice at boot camp in 1980, when I had just joined the army as a fresh recruit.

At the shooting range, the instructor gave each young officer three rounds of bullets, with three bullets per round, to practice aiming at the target. We were all instructed to close our left eye so the right eye could focus on the sight. But, oh dear, for some reason, I couldn't manage to close my left eye! So, instead, I closed my right eye and... just went ahead and fired, thinking I had aimed perfectly.

After the first three shots, the group was ordered to check the targets to see how we did. I nervously walked up but to my shock… There wasn't a single bullet hole on my target! Talk about embarrassing! The instructor gave us another round of bullets, and this time I tried even harder, but when I rushed up to check again—same story. My target was as clean as it was before we started!

By the third round, I was determined to "redeem" myself. I took extra care, focused on everything I had, and was thrilled to see that I had hit the target with all three bullets! But when I got closer… once again, there wasn't a single bullet hole!

At that moment, the Lieutenant next to me asked,

"Hey, how many bullets did they give each of us?"

I answered, "Three rounds, so nine bullets in total."

He widened his eyes, "That's weird! I only fired three rounds, but my target has... 18 bullet holes!"
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That's when everyone started looking at each other… and then at me. From that point on, the instructor made me wear an eye patch over my left eye whenever it was my turn to shoot, and whenever I was up, everyone would... quietly step far away from me! And just like that, I earned myself the nickname "The One-Eyed Lieutenant!"

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April - Leaving My Homeland

Today is the Day of Mourning's call,
Marking forty-five years since our fall.
The day I left my homeland behind,
To seek freedom in skies undefined.
That darkened night, the heavens ablaze,
Flares lit the sky, guns roaring their rage.
Joining the masses, fleeing in strife,
With trembling child, we ran for life.
Tears drenched my face as I turned away,
"Mother dear, I must leave," I'd say.
In foreign lands, my heart aches still,
Missing my homeland with a longing so real.
I see bamboo in every tree,
In every cloud, my Mother I see.
Dreaming of home, I yearn to embrace,
The vision of Mother in her garden's grace.
A bowl of soup from her loving hand,
A simple joy in my native land.
But dreams remain dreams, the years slip by,
Forty-five years of waiting, hearts sigh.
I clutch the flag of red and gold,
Its stripes tell tales of freedom untold.
Oh, my beloved homeland so near,
When will I return, free of fear?
To rest in the arms of liberty's soil,
Reclaim my place after decades of toil.
Oh, cherished land, my heart does implore,
To find peace in your embrace once more.

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4/30/2020

A Mother's Anguish in April
Mother sits burning tangles of despair,
Waiting for her child, yet no one is there.
Far away, o’er mountains and streams,
You left when the enemy crushed our dreams.
April's guns silenced, defeat declared,
Our homeland left shattered, beyond repair.
In a foreign land, do you still strive,
With hope to reclaim, to keep dreams alive?
My child, remember your solemn vow,
With hands clasped, I pray for your return now.
April comes and goes once more,
How long till peace greets our shore?

Dreaming of Returning Home
One day, in a sudden longing, I found,
The river of old where clouds mirrored the ground.
Around me, silence—no songbirds soar,
Only autumn tears fall, as dreams restore.
The old banyan tree is now no more,
Only aged bamboo weeps in rain’s pour.
The river that once brimmed now runs dry,
Like seasons of sorrow in this heart of mine.
Steps falter down a lonely trail,
For my poor homeland, hardships prevail.
The distant past now a fleeting shade,
Where once bloomed blossoms in a pink cascade.
I recall springs where yellow apricots thrived,
Beside Mother and Father, their laughter alive.
Sweets and fruits aplenty, joy in the air,
Now only wistful memories linger there.
When can I visit the grave I hold dear,
Where Mother rests, year upon year?
Oh wind, carry my longing and pain,
Spread my heart’s whispers across this plain.
Wandering steps on the grassy yard,
No butterflies flutter, no faces guard.
By a dried palm, a seat I claim,
Memories stir of a childhood untamed.

Half-asleep, my dreams seem real,
Returning to markets and town's lively zeal.
But searching and searching, I only find loss,
Tears for old schools and faces now glossed.
Temples now cloaked in mossy gloom,
Bustling streets spin in life's chaotic tune.
No shadow remains of a soldier's pride,
Who's gone, who's left in the crowd's divide?
The sea gazes at me with tears of its own,
Seagulls cry, lost in skies unknown.
A boat sways amidst the silvered waves,
I mourn for someone, my heart enslaved.
If nothing remains, then let dreams fade,
Awake with tears from night's charade.
Heavy with thoughts, a heart concealed,
Like twilight drenched in sorrow revealed.
If I could, I'd return to find,
Ashes and bones of those left behind.
To light incense for graves by the road,
And weep for a homeland lost, untold.

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Traditional Customs of Vietnamese Lunar New Year (Tết)

Vietnamese Lunar New Year, known as **Tết Nguyên Đán** or simply **Tết**, is the most important and cherished holiday in Vietnam. It marks the arrival of spring and is a time for family reunions, paying respect to ancestors, and welcoming the new year with hopes for prosperity and happiness. Below are the traditional customs observed during the Tết period:

Preparation for Tết (Before New Year's Eve)

- **Cleaning and Decorating the House**:
  Families clean their homes thoroughly to sweep away bad luck and prepare to welcome good fortune. Special decorations like **hoa mai** (yellow apricot blossoms in the South) or **hoa đào** (pink peach blossoms in the North) are displayed, symbolizing spring and vitality. **Cây quất** (kumquat trees) are also popular, representing prosperity and wealth.
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- **Year-End Offering to Ancestors**:
  Families prepare offerings and clean ancestral altars to invite their ancestors' spirits to return home and celebrate with them.
- **Kitchen God Ceremony (Ông Táo)**:
  On the 23rd day of the last lunar month, Vietnamese families hold a small ceremony to send off the **Kitchen Gods** to Heaven. It is believed they report on the family's affairs to the Jade Emperor. People often release **carp fish** into rivers or lakes as a symbolic gesture.
- **Cooking Traditional Foods**:
  Preparing **Bánh Chưng** (square sticky rice cake) in the North and **Bánh Tét** (cylindrical sticky rice cake) in the South is a significant tradition. These cakes symbolize gratitude and the earth, and making them brings families together.

2. Five-Fruit Tray and Its Meaning

- The **five-fruit tray** represents harmony and prayers for **health, wealth, and happiness**.
  - **Green bananas**: Protection and growth.
  - **Pomelo or watermelon**: Luck and prosperity.
  - **Oranges or tangerines**: Success and fulfillment.
  - **Papaya or mango**: Abundance.
  - **Figs**: Completeness and affluence.
- **Regional Differences**:
  - **Northern Vietnam**: The tray includes bananas, pomelo, tangerines, persimmons, and Buddha's hand fruit, symbolizing unity and protection.
  - **Southern Vietnam**: The tray features **custard apple, coconut, papaya, mango, and figs**, representing "**Cầu vừa đủ xài, sung túc**" ("May you have enough to spend and abundance"). Bananas are avoided as "chuối" sounds like "chúi" (to fail).
- **Watermelon and Watermelon Seeds**:
  - **Watermelon** symbolizes good fortune and happiness.
  - **Red watermelon seeds** signify prosperity, happiness, and unity.

3. Tết Eve (Giao Thừa)

- **Midnight Offerings**:
  Families set up a feast to worship **Heaven and Earth** and make offerings to their ancestors. It is believed that at midnight, a new deity of the household takes over, so offerings are also made to welcome this deity.
- **Fireworks and Celebrations**:
  Fireworks or firecrackers (where permitted) light up the sky, marking the transition to the new year and driving away evil spirits.

4. Custom of Children Wishing Tết Blessings to Grandparents and Parents

- On the first morning of Tết, children wish their grandparents and parents blessings to show gratitude and respect.
- **Common Wishes**:
  - "**Wishing you health, longevity, and happiness surrounded by your family**."
  - "**Wishing you good health, success, and fulfillment in the new year.**"
- Elders reward children with **red envelopes (lì xì)**, symbolizing luck and blessings.

5. First Days of Tết (The New Year)

- **First Visitors and "Xông Đất"**:
  The first person to visit a home (**xông đất**) is very important. It is believed their age, character, and fortune will influence the family's luck for the entire year. Families often invite someone lucky, healthy, or successful to ensure a prosperous start.
- **Wearing New Clothes**:
  People dress in **áo dài** (traditional Vietnamese attire) or colorful new clothes to symbolize a fresh beginning.
- **Giving and Receiving Lucky Money (Lì Xì)**:
  Elders give **red envelopes** containing small amounts of money to children and younger family members, wishing them health, success, and good fortune.
- **Paying Respects to Ancestors**:
  Families visit ancestral graves to honor their forebears and offer prayers. They also light incense on the family altar.
- **Visiting Relatives and Friends**:
  People spend the first few days visiting family, friends, and neighbors to exchange New Year's wishes, such as:
  - **Chúc mừng năm mới** (Happy New Year!)
  - **An khang thịnh vượng** (Health and prosperity)
  - **Vạn sự như ý** (May all wishes come true).

6. Traditional Games and Entertainment

- **Lion Dance (Múa Lân)**:
  Lion dances are performed to ward off evil spirits and bring blessings. These colorful dances are accompanied by drums and cymbals.
- Playing Folk Games**:**
  People enjoy traditional games such as **bài chòi** (a type of bingo singing game) or **đánh đu** (swinging games), especially in rural areas. In addition, modern-day Vietnamese incorporate games like **lô tô** (a form of Vietnamese bingo), **cờ tướng** (Chinese chess), and and **bầu cua cá cọp** (a traditional dice gambling game) during Tet festivities. These games not only entertain but also bring family and friends together, creating a festive and joyful atmosphere throughout the New Year celebration.
- **Visiting Pagodas and Temples**:
  Many people visit pagodas to pray for peace, luck, and happiness in the new year. This is also a time to express gratitude to the divine and seek blessings.

5. **Tết Food and Traditions**

- **Traditional Foods**:
  - **Bánh Chưng / Bánh Tét**: Sticky rice cakes stuffed with pork and mung beans.
  - **Dưa hành** (pickled onions) and **thịt kho tàu** (braised pork belly with eggs) are popular dishes.
  - **Mứt Tết**: A variety of candied fruits and seeds served as snacks for guests.
- **Avoiding Taboo Actions**:
  During Tết, people avoid arguments, sweeping (to prevent sweeping away luck),

and saying negative words. It is time to maintain a positive and harmonious atmosphere.

Tết is not just a celebration of the new year but also a deep cultural and spiritual event, reflecting values of family unity, gratitude, and hope. It is a time when everyone reconnects with loved ones, honors their roots, and looks forward to a brighter future.

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My Vantage Point: American Politics Nowadays

By Blogger Vũ Linh[8]

Diễn Đàn Trái Chiều : American Politics

"Elections have consequences."
President Barrack Obama

Almost 4 years ago, America elected Donald J. Trump as her 45th president. As was the case with all his predecessors, half the country voted for him, the other half selected his opponent. Unlike the case with all his predecessors, years after the elections, close to half of the country is still in a collective state of denial, unwilling to accept the people's legitimate choice.

Never in the long democratic tradition of this nation has a president been so controversial, arousing such hysterical feelings one way or the other. Amazingly, extreme opinions have also been rampant among my fellow Vietnamese Americans (formerly refugees, referred to simply as 'Viet refugees' below, as opposed to Viet citizens being now in the US under foreign passports as tourists, students …) who normally have been a lot more detached from US politics.

For those who have been reading this forum, obviously, I certainly have been more than involved in the red-hot debate about this president, and just as obviously, have been squarely on his side, to the dismay of many.
Full disclosure first: I did not vote for Trump, nor for Hillary Clinton. I did not like the prospect of having to select 'the least bad' candidate. The mere fact that this great

[8] Vũ Linh is a very famous and well-known Blogger in the Vietnamese American community and worldwide
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nation has to make a hard decision to select the 'least bad' instead of welcoming the 'best' candidate is not something that many Americans could feel proud of. But then, one can only deal with the cards one has.

In my large family and even larger circle of friends, many have taken opposite sides, yet we have been able to have a lot of fun discussing American politics without grabbing each other's throat. Maybe like they say, old friendships and especially blood, are thicker than politics after all. Trump comes and goes, friendship and family are not going anywhere.
The least bad? Well, that is my personal opinion. Many other people may have thought America did have a great choice between two exceptionally qualified patriots. Einstein spent his lifetime explaining to us relativism, didn't he?

One more thing that I want to be as clear about as possible: I am not trying to convince anybody of anything whatsoever. As I have reminded many of my relatives and friends, we passed the age of being susceptible to 'brainwashing' or even 'converted' by somebody else long ago, notwithstanding the fact that I neither have the capacity to 'convince' anybody nor the wish to do so. On the contrary, I'd rather hear a different opinion, just for the sake of triggering some smart conversation within the confines of civility.

And maybe more important, for our American friends and our younger compatriots born or raised in this country, I just want them to hear from me to understand why some of the Viet refugees could support Trump.
It just happens that the Viet diaspora is no different than any other ethnic communities, widely disparate, ranging from hard-lined to soft liberals/conservatives, from die-hard pro to deadly against Obama/Hillary/Biden-Trump, you name it.

While I did not vote for Trump, I have been unwittingly sliding to his side, recognizing not just some of his surprising successes, but also witnessing the stupefying alacrity of all the attacks, not against his policies, but against him personally, as identity politics has so dominated American politics lately.
In any case, let's go back to our discussion. Within the constraints of this short essay, I simply cannot discuss everything, thus can only limit myself to certain key issues that are important to us, Viet refugees.
Let's first talk about what many of us, Viet refugees have blamed Trump for.

President Trump's most questionable flaw within my Viet community is of course his apparent 'racism', favoring whites to the detriment of all other races like black, Hispanics and us Asians. Which is evidently a big concern for us. What is less evident for me is whether Trump is really racist or not.

Yes, he did attack Hispanic illegal immigrants. Yet, it sounds more like he has been attacking them as illegals, not as Hispanics as a race nor as immigrants in general.

Yes, he did equate white supremacists to AntiFa mob, but as far as I was concerned, I would have been really confused if he did not equate these 2 groups of lunatics. Yet again, it sounds more like he was attacking their extremism or fanaticism, not the color of their skin. Most AntiFa demonstrators are as white as so called 'supremacist' rednecks, aren't they?
Is he racist against blacks? I have not seen any anti-black acts, nor heard any anti-black diatribes. But I do see things like the lowest black unemployment rates ever. Would that count as something anti-black since that cut them off welfare benefits?

Trump had been in business in all his pre-presidential life, including a big chunk of it in the entertainment business, dealing with sport champions, beauty contestants, comedians, singers, artists, in areas of activities that undeniably have been dominated by blacks. He also was close friends to prominent blacks like Muhammad Ali, Don King, Oprah Winfrey, Diddy, Herschel Walker, to name just a few. Nobody had heard about him being racist against them, until he ran for president. All of a sudden, he became racist just because some people want blacks not to vote for him? Does that make a lot of sense?

The racist label seems to require a lot more hard selling. So maybe the anti-immigrant label could be an easier sell?

For sure, we have witnessed all kinds of rationalization about how America being a country of immigrants should welcome all immigrants with open arms, about how Trump has been so 'un-American' with his 'anti-immigration' policy. But then, has anybody noticed that the mainstream media (MSM) has always intentionally chosen to hit the 'delete' button on the word 'illegal' when writing about illegal immigration, so that whenever Trump criticizes illegal immigrants, it always comes out as simply 'immigrants' without the critically important word 'illegal'? Does that strike anybody as something disgracefully dishonest or intentionally deceptive?
President Trump has been harsh against Islamic people, or so it seems from the way the MSM has been reporting on his Executive Orders. Has he? The EO's restricting admission of people from some Islamic countries affect a grand total of 8% of the Islamic population in the world. None of the biggest Islamic countries has been affected, namely Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia, among so many others, so how could these EO's be anti-Islamic acts? And look at the map: Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Libya that are on Trump's blacklist. Aren't they countries with huge messy wars where nobody knows who are fighting against whom? Can we trust people coming from these countries with some kind of ID papers issued by some obscure warlords whose authorities are not even recognized beyond their own town in ruin? The Supreme Court accepted Trump's explanation and agreed that the responsibility of protecting the country belonged to the president, not to some liberal judges more concerned with political correctness than the safety of their fellow Americans.

The MSM howled against a partisan Supreme Court. Did they do anything similar when that same Supreme Court twisted itself to save Obamacare?
Make no mistake, I welcome all legal immigrants from anywhere anytime. I just don't accept illegal immigrants. No personal hard feelings, just the laws of the land that need to be respected. No one is above the law, including presidents and illegals.

We, Vietnamese Americans, being immigrants ourselves, should be at the forefront of this fight for immigrants. We should be much more sensitive to any attack against immigrants, right?
Last time I checked, I was not able to find any evidences that Trump has been 'racist' toward us. Close to half-a-dozen Vietnamese-American soldiers have reached the rank of general in the US army. A Vietnamese-American lawyer has been appointed as Head of ICE, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

But what I did find was the fact that the Democratic Senator Joe Biden was violently opposed to any way, shape or form of support for the South Vietnamese army to fight against the communist north invasion, and had made it clear he did not support admission of any Viet refugees in the US back in 1975. The pro-Biden crowd has mightily struggled to dig into all sorts of internet search engines to try to find a tangible proof of Biden supporting either our survival fight or our plea for asylum after our country had fallen. The only document they have been able to dig out was an absolutely inconsequential almost unanimous vote by the Senate to 'welcome' the Việt refugees who at that time were already stranded on American soil in Guam and Wake Islands, on May 5, 1975.

Yes, a significant number of us Việt refugees have been incarcerated and are waiting to be deported back to Vietnam, but please allow me to clear all the smoke screen blown by more than a few dishonest anti-Trump activists.
The US has had in place very clear laws dating back God knows how many decades or centuries, that state very clearly that immigrants not having yet US citizenship convicted of crime by a US court of justice under no circumstances can be eligible for US citizenship, thus could not stay in the US and therefore must be deported back to their original country after serving time if any.

The Vietnamese population in the US can be roughly separated into 2 different groups: those who arrived here as refugees under laws passed under presidents Ford, Carter and Reagan; and those who arrived here as normal immigrants under normal existing immigration laws, including laws allowing family reunion. Both groups are subject to the above-mentioned laws against admission of convicted criminals. Unfortunately, criminals do exist in both groups.

As a result, convicted Việt are not eligible to stay and become US citizens. All US presidents from Carter to Trump, have tried to deport these convicted people back to

Vietnam without much success. At long last, President Clinton managed to have an agreement with the Vietnamese communist government after the US formally recognized the Viet communist regime in July 1995.

According to that agreement, Vietnam was willing to take back the convicted Việt who arrived in the US AFTER that formal recognition date, and only them. Vietnam adamantly refused to take back the refugees who arrived in the US prior to that July 1995. Consequently, thousands of convicted Viet refugees arriving before July 1995 got stranded without any
possibility to become US citizens but also not being able to be deported back as Vietnam refused to accept them.

In 2008, President Bush signed a memorandum of understanding reaffirming the Clinton agreement. After much confusion, the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington DC issued a statement clarifying that the agreement on the orderly deportation of convicted Vietnamese citizens did NOT apply to Việt refugees having emigrated to the US prior to July 1995, i.e. VN would not accept them.

Now, going beyond that issue, what are people blaming Trump for?
No president has ever been so harshly criticized by so many people for so many things. Yet, guess what? The overwhelming majority of criticisms has really focused on his personal character.

Some people say they could not have their kids look up to Trump as some kind of a role model. Well, in my view, politicians all the way up to presidents, should be the very last kind of people any kid should look up as role models, regardless of their ideology.

Hell, I'd be the last man calling Trump a saint! He is nowhere near any lowest bar for a well-respected Head of State, still. But then, how do we set those bars? Who does that? Based on what criteria?

Trump is a sexual predator? Is he any worse than some other presidents who did the deed in the Oval Office while blatantly lying to the entire nation and his family, when Trump has been loudly boasting while nobody has seen any act anywhere, except for a tryst with a paid for consensual adult while his wife was pregnant, long before he set his eyes on the White House?

Trump is a liar? If you never lie or don't know how to lie, don't get into politics. Politics is not for boy scouts or preachers. Even Jimmy Carter was lying when he said he would never lie. And for those who have watched Jim Carrey's 'Liars, Liars', they should know there are lies and lies. Some lies are harmful, intentionally duplicitous, some lies are just hyperboles, some are helpful, some are even necessary.
How many lethal or even deceitful lies has Trump said? How do his lies rank with shameless lies like "You can keep your health insurance, your doctor,…"?

On this issue, one can't help noting some kind of contradiction. Some say Trump is the biggest liar, some others assure he is the most honest politician speaking out his mind. So which is which? As far as I am concerned, between a smooth talker and a straight talker, I'd rather take the bitter pill.

Of course, Trump is not perfect. But what about the alternative? Former VP Joe Biden? A man that Obama's Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said had always been wrong about foreign policy? A man that the New York Times asked when was the last time he was right on anything? A man that 48% of the US people think has some form of dementia? A man who cannot open his mouth without misspeaking somehow.
So are we once again facing a choice for the least bad?
Now, let's move beyond individual character which is so easily subject to partisan character assassination, and take a look at Trump's decisions as president. How have they affected us, notwithstanding political ideologies. What has he done specifically?

Obamacare? Yes, he did try to scratch it but was only partly successful. No, he did not intend to chase away sick people to die in the street. He just wanted to correct certain obvious shortcomings that even President Clinton recognized. When the cost of healthcare increases across the board for all of us, when all of us must change insurance carriers, doctors, hospitals, drugs, or even treatment, and when scores of smaller health insurance companies file for bankruptcy or are being swallowed by larger ones, leaving vast counties with no insurer, there is something wrong that needs corrective measures. There has been no agreement on those corrective measures, which is why Obamacare is still around, except for the elimination of the enforcement and tax penalty. Should we continue to try hard to find a better system or should we be happy with this defective one and leave it untouched?

Tax cut? Taxation, besides being a tool for redistribution of income as called for by the liberal schools, is more than anything else a means to manage the economy, like promoting economic expansion and employment. Looking at that angle, what has Trump's tax cut accomplished?
One can even ignore the performance of the stock market as it mostly reflects the investors' speculative moves and tries to take a look at the broader picture. The last quarter's number prior to that COVID calamity was a 3% growth in GDP, the lowest unemployment rates for all categories of workers, be they white, black, young, old, male or female, in all economic sectors. The new tax law brought back about a trillion investment dollar from abroad, helping create scores of new businesses and manufacturing plants. Isn't that what good governance is all about? Isn't having a job more rewarding and more dignifying than collecting welfare hand-outs?
President Obama once advised Michigan workers that their jobs were gone for good, in the trash bin of modern technology development. Then how do we explain the current revival of large swats of manufacturing jobs in the Rust Belt? Does it behoove

the president as a leader to take actions to make things happen or should he just be a spectator watching historic developments from a bench?

Some people have been screaming against Trump's new tax rates. Is that because they are required to pay more taxes? Not exactly. It's just because they look around and see some other people having larger cuts while completely ignoring how their paychecks compare. For these people, nothing less than taxing the top 1% to feed the remaining 99% would do.
Foreign policy? They say Trump has done a terrible job.
He is being too cozy with dictator Putin? How is Trump more cozy with Putin than Obama?
He fails miserably in his trade war with China? How does he compare with Obama who sat back and watched trade deficit jumping to over 500 billion?
He fails to reach any agreement with North Korea? How does that compare to Obama sitting back and watching Kim Jong Un testing all kind of missiles and nuclear bombs?
Between sitting back and do nothing and trying to do something, what's your choice?

Is Trump a legitimate president?

When candidate Trump talked about reserving the right to assess the validity of elections results, the shocking protests from all corners, including from President Obama and candidate Hillary Clinton, were deafening yet fully understandable as Trump's statement sounded like an assault on the American political foundation.
Yet, when Trump won the election fair and square, the losing side screamed election frauds, recount, change the rules, abolish the archaic electoral system, Russian intervention, "Not My President", etc… Calls for impeachment were heard even before Trump was sworn in.
The MSM and the liberals have loudly screamed about possible 'collusion' with the Russians.
Did the Russians attempt to interfere with the US presidential elections? Who's naïve enough to believe they have not? There are hundred of 'registered foreign agents' operating in Washington DC; what can they be doing exactly, except trying to interfere with American politics, elections and whatever else? The question is did Trump –or Hillary for that matter- collude with them? After 2 years of costly scrutiny by a Special Counsel, what evidence has anybody seen besides some indictments for corrupt acts that have absolutely nothing to do with Russian collusion in presidential elections?
Right now, guess what? Mrs. Hillary advised Biden never to concede until all the votes are counted, recounted ad infinitum.
Next time an American diplomat lectures a third-world leader about the democratic process and need for free elections, he'd better think twice unless he is ready to accept being lectured back himself.
To be honest, coming from Vietnam, a country that never had, thus never understood, free elections, I'm confused!

Not only do some people refuse to accept the elections results, they also turn nasty against anything that does not please them, including suppression of freedom of speech through blockade of events where unwanted opinions are presented (see Berkeley), and personal harassment against people they don't like in their daily banal chore such as dining out.
Extreme opinions have turned vicious with people engaging in violent acts against each other collectively in mass demonstrations as well as individually in despicable stunts such as Robert De Niro's obscene rants or Kathy Griffin's bloody Trump's head.

Many have tried to defend these utterly disgusting expressions of political view by blaming president Trump for being the one who somehow has awakened the worst bestial instinct in many people. This line of defense can only remind me of the classic defense commonly used by rapists, "not my fault, she provoked me or even invited me with her way of walking, looking, dressing, whatever…"

The most salient fact in the current political climate is clearly the MSM's attitude, or approach, as sources of information for the public. When a Harvard study reveals that the MSM reporting on Trump is over 90% negative, gone are all pretensions of objectivity that so characterized the well-respected American media for so long.

That CNN guy, Don Lemon expresses his surprise to be called biased. He asks how he could be biased when he just tells the truth? The classic example about that kind of dumb defense is a coin with 2 different pictures on its 2 faces. Two people on opposite sides will see 2 different pictures, so which one is the truth? Is talking only about the one side one sees not biased?

A few years back, when a congressman yelled "You Lie" at Obama, the entire world was shocked at such a lack of respect for a president and the presidency. Nowadays, "F… Trump" has become the new norm for expression in political liberal discourses. Even a congresswoman can call the president a "motherfucker" in full House session, it is considered well within acceptable civility nowadays in Congress, under the Democratic party's rule.
And the public at large does not seem to be much upset. One can only wonder whatever happened to the celebrated American sense of fairness and objectivity and civility? Whatever happened to the American democratic system of government?
That is the current state of American politics, from my vantage point.
Or am I missing something?

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Đà Lạt In Early April 1975

By Nguyễn Đình Cường

Editor's Note*: The author of this article is a former teacher at Trần Hưng Đạo High School. His wife also taught at Bùi Thị Xuân High School. They were the first two teachers of Đà Lạt to flee in July 1977 and seek freedom after the Fall of South Việt Nam. They currently live in Southern California.*

At the end of March 1975, following the fall of Ban Mê Thuột and the escalating turmoil from Quảng Trị southward, Đà Lạt was in extreme agitation. When the National Highway 20 connecting Đà Lạt to Sài Gòn was cut off at Long Khánh, the peaceful and poetic city reached its peak of panic. A broken Molotova truck, towed from the Bảo Lộc front and on display near the roundabout in front of the bus station to Sài Gòn, did nothing to alleviate the fear.

Several high- and low-ranking military and administrative officials had already sent their families to Sài Gòn. Around ten days before the end of March (on the 20th or 21st, perhaps), at about 2 PM, teachers and students at the Hùng Vương Education Center (formerly Lycée Yersin) became agitated when some soldiers arrived to pick up the children of a high-ranking city official hastily.

Civilians scrambled to pack up and flee to Sài Gòn by any means available. Trucks, lumber transport vehicles, private cars, three-wheeled Lambro taxis, and two-wheeled motorcycles became invaluable. At the Việt Nam Airlines office at the Đà Lạt railway station and Liên Khương Airport, people crowded in, coming and going in a frenzy, their faces tense with anxiety. The same chaotic scene unfolded at Cam Ly Military Airport. Rumors, both true and false, spread like wildfire.

Then, the inevitable happened. On the evening of April 1st, Đà Lạt's administrative officials, with the Tuyen Duc Province Military Command and various military academies—including the National Military Academy and the Political Warfare College—evacuated to Đơn Dương, Phan Rang. Around 7 PM that evening, Đà Lạt residents who remained saw flames rising from the Civil Repatriation Office on Nguyễn Trường Tộ Street, behind the Administrative Office and at the National Police headquarters. That night, many people continued their desperate escape in all kinds of vehicles, speeding toward Trai Ham to join the evacuation convoy. The continuous explosions from ammunition depots at Cam Ly and the Military Academy only deepened the fear of those left behind—including myself, as my wife had just given birth to our first son a week earlier! Everyone shared the same dreadful thought: The final moment has arrived!

On the morning of April 2nd, the city was in a state of anarchy! Those who remained wandered in confusion, gathering in small groups across neighborhoods and villages, buzzing with speculation. Military uniforms and weapons were scattered across the

streets. Armed civilians looted abandoned homes, while the market stalls in Đà Lạt were ransacked. Gunfire rang out sporadically. At the logistics depot near the Department of Forestry on Phan Bội Châu Street, a stream of vehicles moved in and out, hauling away supplies. Some trucks were loaded with a chaotic assortment of items—refrigerators, tables, chairs, typewriters, beds, anything and everything. Children as young as 11 or 12 carried three or four M-16 rifles slung over their shoulders, ammunition belts wrapped around their small bodies, fumbling with another gun in their hands, its barrel dangerously pointed at those nearby. People shouted and called to each other. The scene at the Military Academy, the Political Warfare College, and other facilities was reportedly even more "exciting." It was absolute chaos.

By around 1 PM that day, a jeep-mounted loudspeaker roamed the streets, broadcasting announcements from the Đà Lạt People's Self-Management Committee, urging citizens to restore order and surrender weapons. It also ordered former military personnel and civil servants of the old regime to report to Hoa Binh Square. And so, scattered across various roads leading there, people—including myself, alas—walked hesitantly, full of doubts, to "report."

At Hoa Binh Square, a large crowd had gathered, especially in front of the movie theater. Two young men wearing red armbands sat at makeshift tables, registering names into school notebooks. Beside them lay a pile of confiscated weapons. The crowd's loud talk blended with distant gunfire. Around the square, people moved about busily, along with various vehicles. Many young men, wearing red armbands and carrying rifles, either walked or rode on Honda and Suzuki motorcycles, shouting and gesturing energetically.

The night of April 2nd passed heavily. Families huddled around their radios, anxiously following the news. Hearing the voices of Sài Gòn Radio and the Military Radio Network, or the familiar military marches, my heart sank. My mind reeled: Has the change truly come? Is this how it all ends?

Gunfire continued sporadically. That night, one of the Domaine de Marie buildings was set ablaze by looters. Around 2 PM on April 3rd, at the roundabout in front of Thuy Ta Pavilion, a group of young men wearing red armbands blew whistles and brandished guns, stopping motorcycles for inspection. Any vehicle without proper documentation was immediately confiscated. Many owners later searched government offices in vain for their seized motorcycles—officials simply told them, "We don't know!" Trash piled up everywhere, especially around the market, filling the air with a strong stench. The city remained leaderless.

Around 3 PM, another loudspeaker called residents to gather at Hoa Binh Square at 4 PM to hear a speech from the new government representative. It was not until the morning of April 6th that a new leadership committee broadcast an official message urging citizens to maintain order and warning against acts of sabotage. The so-called "People's Self-Governed Committee" quietly disbanded. Only then did Đà Lạt emerge from its state of anarchy.

April 1st—Đà Lạt evacuated! April 30th—Sài Gòn surrendered. Vietnamese history had turned a new page—one filled with grief, separation, pain, and resentment.

Our Journey To Freedom By Sea

By Nguyễn Lâm Viên

The story of *our journey to freedom by sea* has never been written down—until now. The following account is only a summary, as I cannot recall all the details of our perilous voyage in search of freedom.

After the Communist takeover of South Vietnam on April 30, 1975, the new regime brought immense hardship to the Southern people. Hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese officials and civil servants were sent to forced labor camps, deceptively referred to as "re-education camps." The authorities claimed that people only needed to bring food "for ten days," a cunning trick that led many to believe them. Those who did often ended up imprisoned for many years—some for three to five years, others for ten to fifteen years or even longer. Inside these Communist camps, prisoners were subjected to slave-like labor and endured conditions harsher than any other prison. Countless stories have been told about the suffering of the defeated South Vietnamese during those difficult times.

My wife and I were both high school teachers and were not imprisoned, but we were forced to attend numerous political training courses where we were indoctrinated with Marxism, Leninism, and other Communist doctrines. After completing these summer courses, which lasted four to five weeks, we had to write self-incriminating essays to demonstrate our understanding of Marxist-Leninist principles and confess our past "sins" from the Communist perspective. We were also required to praise the new regime. The Communist authorities evaluated us based on our written submissions and how “enlightened” we had become through the “revolutionary ideals.”

Meanwhile, Vietnam’s economy was deteriorating rapidly. Living under such mental and material oppression felt no different from being in prison—a life we refused to accept. So, we decided to escape and seek freedom whenever an opportunity arose.

At that time, we were living in Đà Lạt, a small highland city about 300 kilometers north of Saigon, the former capital of South Vietnam. There, I had a small group of friends secretly planning an escape. They purchased a small fishing boat and prepared for the journey in secrecy, fearing that local authorities would discover and arrest them before they could leave.

Our boat was anchored at Binh Dai, a branch of the Mekong River in My Tho Province. On the night of June 26, 1977, we set sail southeast toward Malaysia. Our group consisted of only sixteen people: five women, ten men, and my 27-month-old son. Our boat was a small fishing vessel, nine meters long and 2.5 meters wide, equipped with

a 10-horsepower engine—hardly strong enough for a long voyage at sea. However, according to the fisherman who helped us prepare for the journey, the boat could reach Malaysia in about ten days if the weather was favorable, and the sea was calm.

As we were at the end of the dry season and the monsoon was approaching, we had to depart before it was too late. We planned to head southeast for a while and then turn southwest toward Malaysia. But on the morning of June 27, we encountered a violent storm. The waves were towering, and the sea was rough. Our small boat could no longer stay on course, and we were pushed northward by the wind and waves.

By 10 PM that night, we had to drop anchor. Unfortunately, the thick anchor rope (about the width of a thumb) became entangled in the propeller, causing the engine to stall. The next morning, we spotted an island, which we identified on the map as Phú Quý Island, about 150 kilometers from Cape Varella in the South China Sea. With our engine disabled, we were helpless.

We had no choice but to wait for the sea to calm down before we could cut the anchor rope, but the strong wind persisted for ten days. Strangely, on the afternoon of July 5, the rope and anchor suddenly slipped into the deep sea. This left us in a desperate situation: our boat was drifting aimlessly, completely out of control.

We had no experience navigating at sea and did not know what to do. We had about 400 liters of fresh water and enough food for twenty days, but most of our supplies had spoiled from seawater and were contaminated by leaking fuel from broken plastic containers. Within a week, we ran out of food and had already consumed a significant portion of our drinking water. By the twentieth day, we had no food left and survived only on the little water we had managed to store in bottles. The water was filthy, but we had no choice but to drink it.

Because our group was small, only sixteen people, we had enough water to ration. I had saved a little uncooked rice in two small *Guigoz* milk cans for my son. Twice a day, I chewed two spoonful of raw rice and fed him mouth-to-mouth.

We endured more storms, with waves as high as two-story buildings lifting our boat to the crest and then plunging it down rapidly for hours on end. Fortunately, our small boat was sturdily built and did not break apart. During these terrifying moments, all the men took turns bailing water out of the vessel to prevent it from sinking. My wife held our son tightly, while I embraced them both with love and sorrow.

We were completely soaked, but the storms also brought extra rain that we managed to collect using our raincoats, providing us with enough water to drink later. Day by day, our strength faded. I even thought that if my wife and son were to die, I would throw myself into the sea to join them, as we had always longed to remain

together. Most of us were covered in painful sores, and in our despair, we resigned ourselves to fate—entrusting our lives to Buddha or God, depending on our beliefs. All we could do was hope that a passing ship would spot our small boat and come to our rescue. We saw about thirty ships, yet only one halted. The sailors aboard glanced at us and inquired if we were in trouble; we tried to explain our dire situation, but the captain could not understand us. An hour later, the ship sailed away without offering any food or water!

We were devastated, feeling the cold grip of death drawing nearer with each passing day. Our hope dwindled as we prayed desperately for a miracle. Then, on the 27th day of our nightmare—July 22, the miracle arrived.
That fateful afternoon, after days of relentless storms, the sky cleared and revealed the distant horizon. Around 3 PM, a ship noticed our small SOS flag and began to approach.
I climbed up the rope ladder the crew lowered and spoke with the captain. Seeing that we were in grave peril, he took pity on us—he knew that without his help, we would all surely perish. He also observed a crack in our boat's hull, through which seawater was seeping, and with rain clouds gathering once more, another storm threatened.

Finally, at approximately 5:30 PM, he allowed us to board his ship.

From the deck, we watched in silent sorrow as our tiny fishing boat drifted away into the vast ocean, like a fragile leaf lost at sea.

The ship then continued its journey to Indonesia. By around 7 PM, the captain invited me into his cabin and showed me a weather report he had just received: a massive storm was advancing from the Philippines, its center positioned exactly where we had just been rescued. I embraced him tightly, tears streaming down my face—overwhelmed by joy, for had that ship not arrived in time, we would have perished at sea.
It took another sixteen days for the Korean ship to reach Bangka Island, near Sumatra in Indonesia. There, local sailors and laborers loaded wood logs onto cargo vessels destined for Korea for commercial use.
Aboard the ship, we sent a letter to UNHCR (the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), detailing our ordeal and pleading for help.

Sixteen days later, Dr. Sampat Kumar, a UNHCR representative from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, flew to Indonesia and journeyed by motorboat to our vessel to interview us. We were then classified as political refugees and granted asylum in Indonesia. With heavy hearts, we left the Korean ship. A small boat ferried us to Bangka Island, and from a modest local airport, we flew to Jakarta.
There, as Dr. Sampat Kumar bid us farewell and concluded his mission, Indonesian authorities took charge of our group, transferring us to a refugee camp near Bogor, 60 km north of Jakarta.

Six months later, on January 25, 1978, we were accepted for resettlement in the United States.

We are profoundly grateful for our new life. For the past forty-seven years, we have enjoyed freedom and opportunities, working hard to achieve dreams that once seemed lost beneath the vast sea—dreams that would have been forever out of reach if that Korean ship had not rescued us. We extend our heartfelt thanks to the kindness and generosity of the American people and the United States.

May God bless our country, our people, and our family.

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A Love Story in Wartime

By Yennga & Chieu

Yennga's Journey

I grew up in the countryside, where my parents worked tirelessly as farmers. They cultivated rice, raised chickens and pigs, and planted tropical fruit trees. I helped where I could, though I never embraced the farm life. Deep inside, I knew education was my key to a better future—not just for me, but for my children, who deserved a life free from hardship.

Living in a war-torn village was as terrifying as I can remember. The sound of gunfire pierced the night, and the next morning, news would spread of the dead. This was so common that I missed many school days, eventually repeating the fifth grade in 1965. It was heartbreaking.

By late 1967, my parents made the difficult decision to move to Mỹ Tho, a nearby city. They built a modest home for our family of six. I grew especially close to my younger sister—we shared everything, including whispered dreams late into the night. I was excited by city life, where movies and shop-lined streets replaced the fear of war.

I felt immense relief when I passed the entrance exam for the girls' public school. If I hadn't, my parents might not have been able to afford my education. Wearing the traditional white áo dài uniform filled me with pride and hope.

Life finally seemed to settle—until the Lunar New Year of 1968. Despite a ceasefire agreement, the Việt Cộng attacked. Houses burned, bullets flew, and we barely escaped. From a distance, I watched our home consumed by flames. My books, clothes, and photos…everything was gone. We were left with nothing.

My mother insisted I quit school and find work to help the family survive. I was almost 15, with no money for books, supplies, or even a dress. The thought of abandoning my education was unbearable. What kind of future would I have?
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Desperate, I confided in my older sister. Days later, she told me about a newly opened pharmacy looking for helpers. She introduced me to the owner, who agreed to train me as a pharmacy technician for two months—no pay, but meals included. After training, I could work mornings and attend school in the afternoons.

My dream was back! And on my first day at the pharmacy, fate stepped in.

I met Chieu.

He was the grandson of the house owner, an exceptionally bright student, and the most handsome boy I had ever seen. His smile was unforgettable. My heart raced whenever I saw him. I needed a plan to get his attention.

The next morning, I arrived early, hoping to see him before he left for his 11th-grade national exam. When I spotted him, I nervously handed him a tube of Vitamin C candy. "Good luck on your test," I whispered. His smile stayed with me the whole morning, stamped over every medicine bottle I touched.

I was in deep trouble—wasn't I?

When he passed his exam and entered 12th grade, I found more reasons to see him. One morning, I casually asked if he had eaten breakfast. When he said no, I made a mental note.

The next day, I woke before dawn, walked over two kilometers in the opposite direction, and bought the best sandwiches in town. As I approached the pharmacy, I prayed he was still there. Nervously, I offered him one.

"Thank you," he said with a soft smile.

Relief washed over me. I didn't know what I would've done if he had refused.

Our connection deepened. One day, I asked him for a ride on his motorcycle—my not-so-subtle excuse to be close to him. As we rode, he shyly admitted, "You're the first girl to ride with me."

It didn't take long before I found my arms wrapped tightly around him.

Time passed, and Chieu graduated high school, then entered Saigon University before joining the Naval Academy in 1973. He was stationed in Vung Tau. Meanwhile, I moved to Saigon, helping my aunt with her bakery. When he had breaks, he visited me, and we spoke of our future together.

Then came April 30, 1975.

I was in Mỹ Tho with my sister for my grandmother's memorial. That morning, we heard gunfire. The roads to Saigon were blocked. I was frantic—I had promised to meet Chieu that day. Ignoring my mother's pleas to wait, we attempted the journey but were forced to turn back. Hours later, South Vietnam surrendered.

Two days later, I reached Saigon. I searched desperately for Chieu. His mother told me he had taken his two youngest brothers onto his naval ship that morning. He had not returned.

Days turned into weeks. There was no word. No one knew if he was alive.

Three months later, his family received news—he and his brothers had made it to a refugee camp in Hong Kong. I clung to that hope. Then, six months later, a letter arrived. His handwriting. My hands trembled as I opened it. Under a different name, he hinted that he was now in the U.S. That night, I slept with the letter on my chest, as if holding onto a piece of him.

Life in Saigon was bleak. I found work as an accountant, earning barely enough to survive. The government forced city workers into unpaid labor—clearing fields, planting crops. We had to bring our own food. Every month, we were rationed a kilo of rice, sugar, and flour. To make ends meet, I sold what little I could on the black market. I even parted with my cherished ocean-blue áo dài—the one I had worn beside Chieu when he was in his navy uniform.
At night, I lived in my memories—the zoo visits, motorcycle rides, our secret picnics. Six years of love, dreams, and plans, now reduced to longing.
I had to find him.
I heard whispers of people escaping by fishing boats. Some made it. Others drowned. "If light poles could walk, they'd leave too," people said.
I would leave, no matter what the risk.
One day, a trusted coworker confided that his cousin—a fisherman—was seeking funds to build a boat for an escape. My heart pounded. But where would I get the money?
I turned to my older sister. She had known Chieu and loved him, too. Days later, she handed me her most precious possession—her diamond ring. Its sale covered my share of the escape.
I wept in her arms, overwhelmed. I wanted to shout my happiness to the world, but I knew I had to stay silent.
I was finally going to find him.
Wait for me, my love. Wait for me.

Chieu's Story

I was born and raised in Mỹ Tho, where I lived with my loving and caring grandparents. My father was transferred to the northern part of the country while I was still a sickly newborn, so I was unable to accompany my parents on the long journey. When they later returned to Sài Gòn, about 50 miles from Mỹ Tho, my grandparents sent me back to live with my parents, three sisters, and younger brother. Leaving my grandparents broke my heart. At night, I wept, missing them deeply. My parents quickly realized how much I longed for my grandparents. A few days later, my father drove the entire family to my grandparents' house and left me there. Words could not describe my joy.
I spent my childhood happily with my grandparents, sometimes feeling like a little prince. I excelled in school, consistently ranking in the top five. At 15, my grandfather gifted me a motorcycle. My classmates were always welcome to visit and even stay overnight. I knew I was spoiled, but in return, I strived to be a kind and respectful young man.
Our house was large and located in a commercial area. The front had been converted into a pharmacy run by my uncle after my grandfather's passing in 1968. Every week, I visited my grandfather's grave, crying and promising to be successful in life, just as he had wished for me. I missed him terribly.
During the week of my national exams after 11th grade, my friends and I gathered in front of the pharmacy, discussing our test performances. While chatting, I noticed a pretty girl working behind the pharmacy counter. What should I do as the main resident

of the house? Since I had always attended public boys' schools, I had never interacted much with girls.
How could I start a conversation? Should I introduce myself? Would I feel awkward if I said nothing? What if one of my friends spoke to her first?
Summoning my courage, I approached her with a broad smile after the last customer left. Without using any formal pronouns, I asked, "Just start working today? What's your name?"
Her long hair bounced slightly as she looked up from her math book. I saw twinkling stars—whether they were from her eyes or mine, I wasn't sure. Her voice was pleasant. "Yennga. I just started this morning. I work in the morning and go to school in the afternoon."
Then she asked, "Are you taking the national exam this week?"
Proudly, I smiled and answered, "Yes! I am."
I didn't want the conversation to end too soon, so I glanced at her open math book and found my next question. "Are you going into 9th grade?"
She looked surprised, a little shy. "Yes! I was held back a year because of the war. My parents' house in the countryside was burned down."
The next morning, as I passed through the pharmacy, she handed me a tube of Vitamin-C candy. "Good luck on your tests today," she said.
I walked away with a funny feeling, thinking, "There must be an invisible hook in this candy—I can't resist!" My classmates noticed the permanent smile on my face that day.
She never asked how I guessed her grade. Later, after talking with others, she learned more about me. I later found out that, in her mind, she had already decided—this was the guy she was going to get, no way out. Even today, she still admits that she was impressed, albeit a little embarrassed, that I figured out her grade so quickly.
A year later, after high school graduation, I moved to my parents' house in Sài Gòn for college. We were sad but had no choice but to communicate through letters. Once, I rode my motorcycle back to Mỹ Tho, stopped at the pharmacy to say hello to her, then returned to Sài Gòn.
As the war escalated and the draft calls increased, many of my friends joined the military. I chose the Navy. After two years of training at the Naval Academy in Nha Trang, I became a naval officer assigned to Swift Boats (PCF) and War Patrol Boats.
At dawn on April 30, 1975, after rushing back at night from Vung Tau (Cap St. Jack) on Long Tau River in the opposite direction of ships and boats fleeing to the ocean, we temporarily docked at the Saigon Naval Headquarters to take a wounded lieutenant ashore. He had been shot during the retreat from Cat-Lo Naval Base. We then moved to a less exposed docking area.
My parents' house was just a few miles away. I asked some of my crew to stay aboard and wait while I visited home. My plan was to check on my family and then meet with other officers to decide our next move.
I took my motorcycle back to my parents' house. Seeing my mother first, I quickly asked if my father was home. He was still on duty in Can Tho, 200 kilometers away. My mother and my eight younger siblings had made no preparations to flee.

I also knew that Yennga was trapped in her hometown, 70 kilometers from Sài Gòn. When we met two weeks earlier, she had told me she had to return for her grandmother's memorial ceremony. I had asked her twice if she could find a reason to stay in Sài Gòn, but she insisted she couldn't. So, I let it go, hoping the situation wouldn't deteriorate quickly. Now, I sat in agony, realizing she was out of reach.
As I finished the breakfast my younger sister bought for me, the sounds of gunfire and rockets grew closer. I told my mother I had to return to the boat. I could take two people with me; I might go out to sea for safety. My mother called for my two youngest brothers, aged 7 and 9. They hopped onto the motorcycle.
When we arrived at the dock, the gate was closed. Navy guards were trying to control the flood of people attempting to enter. I managed to show my ID and convinced them to let us through. We were incredibly lucky.
Back on the boat, we listened to the radio. Around 10 AM, South Vietnam's new "one-day" president announced surrender. The communists had taken Sài Gòn. My heart sank. I pinched myself, hoping to wake up from this nightmare.

My mind raced. Could the communists control South Vietnam without executing or imprisoning officers? I thought of the Tet Offensive in 1968 when thousands in Hue—including government workers and teachers—were executed just for serving the South Vietnamese government.
What should I do?
Going home meant living under their control.
Mom, I don't want you to witness my suffering.
Yennga, my love, my life here is over. I don't want to trap you in misery by staying.

I had failed to take her out of the country in time. I escaped to Hong Kong and then arrived in the U.S. in October 1975 with my two younger brothers.

Yennga found work as an accountant in Sài Gòn. In 1977, she fled Vietnam on a fishing boat with her younger brother and my 18-year-old brother. They reached Malaysia, then took another boat to Australia.
Finally, in the fall of 1978, we reunited in Minnesota. Together, we continued our love story, building a new family in a free country.
Thanks to America and the Americans who helped us start anew.



30/4/1975 – 30/4/2025



Home Calling– Oil on Canvas by Artist Trương Thị Thịnh



Black April 30/4/2023 in Pinellas Park, FL – VACA's CEO and Friends
VP Richard Diệm Nguyễn, Minh Ánh, President Phạm Hiếu Liêm, VP Bùi Hữu Liêm
& dear friends Nguyên Thiện and former RVN Airborne Officer Lê Hòa Hiệp

Our deep gratitude to all Vietnam Veterans, RVN Arm forces, and people who sacrificed for our Freedom.

The Legacy of Freedom on the 50th Year Remembrance of South Viet Nam

In our efforts to preserve the culture, history, and heritage for the younger generation—children of former citizens of the Republic of Vietnam who fled communism—we have worked hard to organize writing contests for high school students. We have also invited U.S. veterans, former servicemen of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, and respected elders to participate by writing and sharing their experiences before and after the war in both their homeland and in the country that has since given us freedom and opportunities for a better life.

In the future, we plan to host a drawing contest for elementary school students to encourage them to express and develop their talents.

We sincerely thank our President-Dr. Phạm Hiếu Liêm and his wife, as well as Vice President Bùi Hữu Liêm, for their support in the printing process, Dr. Dao Perkins, and all the generous contributors who helped make VACA's first book publication possible.

As this is our first experience, there may be some shortcomings. We respectfully ask for your understanding and continued support in helping us publish the next edition in 2026.

With your encouragement and assistance, we hope to continue this tradition every year.

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