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The Vietnamese refugee experience : a fundamental redefinition of an ethnic identity

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Furcinitti, Laura A., M.A.

San Jose State University, 1992

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THE VIETNAMESE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE
A FUNDAMENTAL REDEFINITION OF AN ETHNIC IDENTITY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Social Sciences
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By

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May, 1992

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ABSTRACT

THE VIETNAMESE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE THE FUNDAMENTAL REDEFINITION OF AN ETHNIC IDENTITY

by Laura A. Furcinitti

This thesis explores the Vietnamese "refugee experience" as a process of adaptation from flight to resettlement, upon which refugees once settled in the host environment must confront a challenge to their ethnic identity. The "refugee experience" materialized at the onset of the perceived threat of persecution by the Communist regime and became a realization with the fall of Saigon in 1975.

This thesis aims at understanding that the refugee experience continues years after the process of resettlement has begun. Its purpose is to show that as a result of the acute political crisis and resettlement process, an emerging key factor in the refugee experience is the fundamental redefinition of the Vietnamese ethnic identity.

The Vietnamese refugee experience can be comprehended and examined by conducting a life history interview. The significance of the life history method is that it provides an instrumental means of investigating the refugee's sociocultural adaptation to the experience of being a refugee.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"In San Jose, California, bearers of the Vietnamese surname Nguyen outnumber the Joneses in the telephone directory 14 columns to eight" (Henry, 1990, p. 29). This statement is indicative of an emergent immigrant pattern in the San Francisco Bay Area, California as well as the influx of Vietnamese refugees into Santa Clara County, California. A recent statistical report on Asian Americans reveals that more than 600,000 Vietnamese are currently living in almost every state and territory of the United States (Gardner, 1985). California, alone, is responsible for housing nearly one-third of the total refugee population (Strand & Jones, 1985). Santa Clara County, behind Los Angeles and Orange Counties in California, has the third largest concentration of Indochinese (Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao peoples) refugees with at least 75,000 Vietnamese (Freeman, 1989).

The disastrous effects of the Vietnam War for both South Vietnam and the United States were evident in the ensuing onslaught of a massive exodus of first-wave Vietnamese refugees to the United States. Immediately following the collapse of Saigon approximately 130,000 Vietnamese found refuge in the United States. Since the

fall of Saigon in South Vietnam in 1975 there has been a constant flow of Vietnamese refugees into the United States. As a result the United States has become host to a new minority population: Vietnamese refugees.

Statement of the Problem

The "refugee experience" is the process of reestablishing an ethnic identity as an inherent part of the act of becoming a refugee and the process of adaptation from flight to resettlement. Implicitly, for the Vietnamese refugee, the "refugee experience" materialized at the onset of the perceived threat of persecution by the Communist regime and became a realization with the fall of Saigon and entry into the United States. As a result of this tragedy, traditional ways of life have been altered.

Undeniably, as a result of the acute political crisis and resettlement process, an emerging key factor in the "refugee experience" is a fundamental redefinition of the Vietnamese ethnic identity (Zetter, 1988) due to ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences from their host society. Moreover, refugees have "dissimilar . . . experiences, and expectations" (Strand & Jones, 1985, p. 2). The Vietnamese exodus from flight to resettlement into the United States placed the first-wave Vietnamese refugees

"within a new dynamic and transitional context, an ambiguous situation betwixt and between all fixed points of classification" (Takaki, 1989, p. 18).

Significantly, the refugee experience continues years after the process of resettlement has begun. In an unpublished essay, anthropologist Gabrielle Tyrnauer makes the point that ". . . one always remains a refugee in certain aspects of behavior. While assimilation implies an act of becoming, it is a process that has no fixed terminus" (Nguyen & Halpern, 1989, p. 11). Thus, the experience of being a refugee greatly affects both their world view and their self-concept.

Vietnamese refugees, once settled in the host society, confronted a challenge to their identity. Refugees confronted the disruption of their former existence: "these stresses are factors in the refugees' ability to assimilate and adapt to American life" (Strand & Jones, 1985, p. 10). The identity of the Vietnamese refugee was no longer a given, but became a question; it became a

. . . struggle for a return to "normalcy" with migration to a permanent home: a new norm, a new status, one that can never be equivalent to the old one, but one that does represent the reestablishment and renewal of self in a new sociocultural framework. (Nguyen & Halpern, 1989, p.10)

Vietnamese refugees in the United States are in the process of change and adaptation as a result of the new

sociocultural environment. The fact of being propelled into America has caused an ethnicity crisis for first-wave Vietnamese refugees: "Being 'in America, but not of it,' even if they wished to, represents an important aspect of the experience of most foreign groups and a major force in promoting ethnic identity in subsequent generations" (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990, p. 140).

The experience of being a refugee varies greatly and is dependent upon such variables as gender and age at departure (Haines, 1985), date of departure (Nguyen & Halpern, 1989), and time of arrival--all of which influence the adaptation process. Moreover, the sociocultural environment into which Vietnamese refugees are placed deeply affects their adaptation process. Despite these variables and internal diversities, Vietnamese refugees possess certain common characteristics. There exist commonalities in the experience of being a refugee: threat; escape; danger; repression (Nguyen & Halpern, 1989); instability; the issues of survival and nostalgia (Freeman, 1989); and entry into a new society. Entry into a new society may involve such factors as grief or personal success (Nguyen & Halpern, 1989) or nativist bigotry as an integral part of the adaptation process.

Vietnamese refugees enter the United States with a distinct sociocultural system which includes important

cultural distinctions: a deep respect for education; discipline; and reverence of family (Steinberg, 1987). Yet there is a diversity of origins. Some families come intact; others arrive alone. Nguyen and Halpern (1989) point out that economic as well as religious backgrounds differ. Vietnam is a country of many overlapping faiths which include Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and even Catholicism. However, Buddhism is the dominant religion.

Crucial to the Vietnamese culture is their symbiotic history with China. The Chinese ". . . influence is particularly evident in the Confucian heritage in Vietnamese familial and political structures but can also be seen in their art, language, and literature" (Nguyen & Halpern, 1989, p. 6).

This distinct sociocultural system and accompanying world view brought by Vietnamese refugees is important in the adaptation process. This process is ". . . determined by two main variables: the receptivity found by newcomers in American society, and their social class of origin" (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990, p. 175).

Although America was in the midst of an economic recession (Loescher & Scanlon, 1986) and despite nativist bigotry, the experience of transition for the group of first-wave Vietnamese refugees was favorable because the American ". . . government [took] an active role in

facilitating the adaptation of new arrivals [and] . . . sanctioned upper-class refugees coming in the initial waves of political exodus tend[ed] to undergo a fairly rapid process of . . . adaptation" (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990, p. 176).

The vast majority of first-wave refugees were composed primarily of the well-educated middle-class, government officials, professionals and their families who had some form of contact with the westernized world. Nonetheless, refugees experienced a fundamental redefinition of their ethnic identity.

Therefore, as a result, the nature of ethnicity for Vietnamese refugees in the United States is distinctive and unique from other parts of the world where Vietnamese refugees have resettled. Portes and Rumbaut (1990) write of the plight of first generation immigrants which can aptly be applied to first-wave Vietnamese refugees and first generation refugees who are

More attuned to American culture and fluent in English, descendants of first immigrants have gained "voice" and have used it to reaffirm identities attacked previously with so much impunity . . . ethnic resilience is a uniquely American product because it has seldom reflected linear continuity with the immigrant's culture, but rather has emerged in reaction to the situation, views, and discrimination they faced on arrival. (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990, p. 96)

Vietnamese refugees are a noteworthy populace in our society due to their numbers and the history of United

States/Vietnamese relations. The fundamental shift to a multi-ethnic community, substantially composed of Vietnamese refugees creates a need to understand the Vietnamese sociocultural adaptation process to the host society.

The Vietnamese refugee experience can be comprehended and examined by conducting a life history. The life history offers a tremendous opportunity for capitalizing on the merits of a multiethnic community. The significance and intention of utilizing a life history method are two-fold: it provides a qualitative framework of ethnicity which is instrumental in terms of investigating the refugees' process of reestablishing an identity; it provides a qualitative framework in which to investigate the sociocultural adaptation process to the experience of being a refugee.

The purpose of the life history is to look beyond the historical accounts, the media reports, the demographic profiles, and the official statistics of the Vietnamese refugee experience and to examine, through the eyes of the refugee/narrator, the sociocultural transitions through oral transmissions.

There is a current movement of distinctive and literary genre (Langness & Frank, 1981) on Vietnamese refugees, particularly in the form of life histories. Such books as When Heaven and Earth Changed Places by Le Ly Hayslip, Tears Before The Rain: An Oral History of the Fall

of Vietnam by Larry Engelmann, The Far East Comes Near by Lucy Nguyen-Hong-Nhiem and Joel Martin Halpern, and Hearts of Sorrow: Vietnamese-American Lives by James M. Freeman capture the lives of Vietnamese people. However, even though these narratives bring to light the plight of Vietnamese refugees, they do not focus specifically upon the "refugee experience"--the process of reestablishing an ethnic identity as an inherent part of the act of becoming a refugee and the process of adaptation from flight to resettlement. Nor do the life histories previously mentioned concentrate on the "refugee experience" of the younger population of first-wave Vietnamese refugees. This thesis aims at revealing the process of the "refugee experience" in order to create the fundamental redefinition of an ethnic identity through a life history. In turn, the life history serves as a viable means to understand the process of formation of an ethnic consciousness. Moreover, the life history reveals the process through which the refugee/narrator weaves meaning and identity out of the refugee's memories and experiences (Myerhoff, 1978).

In order to reveal this process, the life history has been written in the words of the refugee/narrator. It captures the refugee's memories and experiences of life in Vietnam before the fall of Saigon. Furthermore, the life history captures the refugee's experiences and views of the

adaptation process as the ingress into the United States and the subsequent years of living in the United States.

Overall, the life history captures the refugee's perception of: American society; the adaptation process; and discrimination against the refugee's own group.

This thesis documents the life history of a male Vietnamese refugee. The purpose of utilizing the life history of one particular individual is that it enables the in-depth collection and insight "into the motivational processes of the individual and the various circumstances that led to current conditions" (Kikumura, 1981, p. 137). Whereas, the collection of many life histories limits the "humanistic quality of life experiences and . . . obscure[s] the relationship of the individual to the culture and society" (Kikumura, 1981, p. 137).

The narrator chose the pseudonym "Lac Van Nguyen" for the explicit purpose of protecting his identity and that of his family members. Names of geographical locations, people, and specific incidences have also been altered, but all other collected information remains factual.

Lac was born in Gia Dinh, a province in South Vietnam on January 13, 1969. The narrator became a refugee at the age of six, in April 1975 as South Vietnam fell to the North Vietnamese. Fortunately for Lac and his immediate family, his brother-in-law was an employee of the United States

government and learned of the impending collapse of the South Vietnamese government. Because of this they were able to escape before the fall of Saigon. The narrator and his family members were evacuated and flown to the island of Guam. From there they were flown to Camp Pendleton in California and then resettled for one year in Alabama. Lac and his family are currently living in California. The narrator is now a full-time student in the California State University system.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section consists of a discussion of the pertinent issues relating to the refugee experience; review of the refugee literature, and review of the adaptation and ethnicity literature. While I use the life history method, it is not the primary focus of this study (Reviews of the life history literature can be found in: Bryant-Merrill, 1985; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Dollard, 1935; Kluckhohn, 1945; and Langness and Frank, 1981).

Review of the Refugee Literature

Differences Between a "Refugee" and an "Immigrant"

Refugees are not immigrants, people who voluntarily depart their homelands to seek a better life. Refugees are people, individuals, families, or nations (Smyser, 1987) who flee their country of origin owing to external aggressions. Refugees, "share a common background. They have cut off ties with the country of their birth, and they are venturing into a new land with little formal preparation" (Kitano and Daniels, 1988, pp.136-137). All refugees share the experiences of: rapid flight; a severe separation from country of origin; and financial losses. These experiences profoundly condition the redefinition of an ethnic identity and impact the adaptation process in the host environment.

Refugee migration is neither voluntary nor economic. Instead, refugee migration is forced by a fear of repression and retaliation. Hence, the term "refugee," according to the internationally accepted definition, specifies persons forced to flee for their lives because of their well-founded fears of being persecuted due to their political, religious, or ethnic affiliation (Loescher & Scanlon, 1986) and can be distinguished from "immigrants" who choose to come to a new life (Freeman, 1989). The Vietnamese migration meets all of the requirements of a forced migration. Thus, the concept of the term "refugee" can be applied to the Vietnamese who fled during the fall of Saigon and the subsequent flights by sea which were involuntary (Strand & Jones, 1985).

Haines (1989) notes that, in reference to those refugees who enter into the United States, "compared with immigrants, refugees are typically better educated, earn more income, and have higher status occupations than their fellow countrymen" (p. 41). First-wave refugees, in general, were composed of the well-educated middle-class who experienced downward occupational mobility upon arrival in the host environment due to the linguistic differences. It then becomes difficult to transfer occupational skills as well as status. This factor contributed to a crisis in the redefinition of an ethnic identity.

Moreover, a prevailing element is that refugees are "not voluntary migrants and therefore may look upon their stay in a country as temporary, awaiting the day that they can return to their homes" (Kitano & Daniels, 1988, pp. 149-150). Freeman (1989) in his book, Hearts of Sorrow: Vietnamese-American Lives documents this phenomena by labeling it the "issue of nostalgia." This issue of nostalgia has created a dilemma in the adaptation process of Vietnamese refugees as seen in Lac's life history interview.

Waves of Vietnamese Refugees

Some four decades of war have turned many people of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos into refugees. The departure of the United States forces from Indochina in 1973 and the victory of the North Vietnamese communists in 1975, did not end either the fighting or the uprooting of the people there. This is especially traumatic for Vietnamese refugees because in their 4,000-year history (Tepper, 1980) they had never been forced to flee their own country.

The process of becoming a refugee developed as a concern of striking proportions in April 1975 as South Vietnam fell to the Viet Cong. As communist troops rapidly approached Saigon, the controlled evacuation that had been planned became a confused and tragic event (Feagin, 1989).

Approximately 145,000 Vietnamese fled the country, eventually arriving in the United States to be cared for temporarily in refugee camps (Liu, 1979).

Scholars have classified Vietnamese arriving in America in several ways. Some (Haines, 1985, and Kitano & Daniels, 1988) emphasize chronology. Haines (1985) identifies four types of Vietnamese refugees in the United States: first-wave refugees, who left South Vietnam at the end of the war in 1975; second-wave refugees, also called "boat people" who left during 1978-1979 when the Vietnamese Communist government attempted to eliminate the Chinese business community; the escapees, who organized trips by way of boats to Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand or by walking across the borders of Cambodia and Laos into Thailand; and the orderly departures, who emigrated after 1979 after the agreement between the Vietnamese Communist government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of first-wave refugees were composed of the well-educated middle-class, government officials, professionals and their families. This group of people "recognized that their middle-and upper-middle class lifestyles would not be compatible with a communist regime; they feared reprisals and personal harm, so escape was a necessity" (Kitano & Daniels, 1988, p.137).

In contrast, the second-wave refugees were composed of a more diverse group. They represented a wider spectrum including educated professionals as well as people from rural areas. The second-wave refugees were predominantly ethnic Chinese who left at the height of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict during the 1978-1979 period. The plight of the "boat people" has been well documented: "Atrocities committed against the refugees include robberies, assaults, murder, multiple rapes, and abductions. It is estimated that 50 percent of people who left Vietnam by boat never reached shore" (Haines, 1985, p. 206).

The escapees were Vietnamese who plotted their own escapes by sea:

Theirs was the riskiest type of departure. If caught by the authorities, they would be imprisoned . . . Like the second-wave refugees, escapees landed first in countries neighboring Vietnam in Southeast Asia, where they lived in makeshift camps and began their long wait to be screened and accepted by countries of final resettlement. (Haines, 1985, pp. 200-201)

In order to discourage the flow of clandestine departures the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) was negotiated between Vietnam and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1979 (Kessler, 1991). Under the twelve-year-old ODP, "applicants are screened by representative from prospective resettlement countries

before leaving Vietnam" (Kessler, 1991, p. 21). Orderly departures were those people who were permitted to depart directly from Vietnam to a country of resettlement.

Under the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) approved by 78 countries in 1989 (Smyser, 1987), "all Vietnamese and Lao who flee their countries undergo a screening procedure to determine whether they meet the internationally accepted definition of a refugee" (Kessler, 1991, p. 20).

Conceptual Model of "The Refugee in Flight"

The purpose of a conceptual model is to organize in a useful way the significant factors related to the mass exodus of Vietnamese refugees beginning in 1975.

E.F. Kunz's (1973) model of the refugee in flight is directly applicable to the first-wave of Vietnamese refugees who fled from Vietnam. As Stein (1986) notes, "the key to Kunz's model of flight is the idea of push" (p. 9). Vietnamese refugees are pushed out, not pulled out as voluntary migrants are. The push factor is the fear of political persecution by the Communist regime. Most Vietnamese refugees of the first-wave were not poor people and were well-integrated into their home society (Stein, 1986). The Vietnamese person, be it an urban or rural person, was a self-sufficient functioning individual in the refugee's native environment. The push factor, combined

with the spirit of resiliency shaped in the native culture, has been transformed in the host environment as an adaptive mechanism as a means of survival.

Another key aspect of Kunz's model is the flight and settlement pattern. Kunz divides the refugee movement into two kinetic types: anticipatory and acute. The term, "kinetic," refers to ". . . the existence of an inner self-propelling force" (Kunz, 1973, p. 131). The term, "anticipatory," refers to the refugee ". . . who leaves his home country before the deterioration of the military or political situation prevents his orderly departure" (Kunz, 1973, pp. 131-132). The term, "acute," refers to refugee movements that ". . . arise from great political changes or movements of armies . . . their primary purpose is to reach safety in a nearby country which will grant them asylum" (Kunz, 1973, p. 132). The "acute" refugee movement specifically pertains to the Vietnamese flight from Vietnam due to the collapse of the Nguyen Van Thieu government in South Vietnam and the replacement of this government by the Communist regime.

The "pull" factor is relevant to anticipatory refugee movements. Superficially, this resembles the voluntary migrant movements (Stein, 1986). Unlike acute refugee

movements, the anticipatory refugee movement involves the refugee leaving his country of origin before a political crisis makes orderly departure impossible.

The acute refugee movement of which the first-wave Vietnamese were a part, contrasts with that of the anticipatory movement in terms of kinetics. The "inner self-propelling force" is an overwhelming push. This may involve an atmosphere of hysteria and mass flight as typified by the Vietnamese flight. Stein (1986) notes that one study of Vietnamese refugees found that 85 percent of the refugees that were surveyed made their decision to flee two days to two hours before departure. This illustrates for Vietnamese refugees an acute response to the threat of persecution. As a result of this acute crisis, ". . . refugees in particular undergo a tremendous number of both undesirable life changes in the process of their geographical and social uprooting" (Haines, 1989, p. 41). This factor is relevant to the refugee's long-term adaptation process.

Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugees

The initial refugee resettlement efforts were viewed by the American government as being a short-term process. The initial exodus involved the transportation of refugees into camps in the Pacific and then to others in the United States

before being resettled into local communities by voluntary agencies (For an excellent documentation on the initial resettlement process see Liu, 1979).

Initial efforts were made to disperse the refugees throughout the United States as a means of facilitating the adaptation process. Kitano (1988) states that, "this policy also sought to avoid intense competition for jobs in specific localities, which would arouse a backlash by American workers" (p. 50).

Despite these initial efforts, the resettlement of refugees was characterized by secondary migration. These secondary migrations led to a heavy concentration in just a few states:

Seventy-five percent of all Indochinese refugees live in only twelve states (California, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Washington). California has the largest refugee population (248,900), followed by Texas (54,900), and Washington (31,000). California and, until 1982, Texas have been magnets for the secondary migration of Vietnamese refugees. Secondary migration may be prompted by a variety of reasons: climate, employment opportunities, reunification with relative accessibility to social services, and the pull of established ethnic communities. (Haines, 1985, p. 202)

The goal of any resettlement policy is the successful adaptation of refugees into the country of asylum (Strand & Jones, 1985).

Review of the Adaptation and Ethnicity Literature

The resettlement efforts of the United States government and the voluntary agencies has been considered a success:

This success has been aided partly by the traditional American compassion for refugees, partly by the Vietnamese culture, which emphasizes the need to live "in harmony with the environment," and partly by the refugees' capability (gained throughout their turbulent history) to accommodate to changing circumstances. (Haines, 1985, p. 206)

This quote merits the attention to a brief synopsis of the historical and sociocultural background of Vietnam as it lends to the "refugee experience" and lays the foundation for the life history interview.

Historical Background

The Vietnamese, almost without exception, are extremely proud of their heritage. Thuy (1976) notes that

Many important and complex factors have shaped the thinking and behavior of the Vietnamese. Even some Vietnamese admit that the behavioral complexity of their fellow countrymen is often bewildering. An awareness of factors which have shaped Vietnamese thinking, behavior and cultural characteristics is vital to any attempt to understand the Vietnamese, especially those newly arrived on American soil. (p. 5)

and

A number of nonreligious and nonphilosophical events have also tremendously affected the Vietnamese people. Constant warfare from the beginning of their history is one example. The two recent long and devastating wars [the war with France that ended in the Geneva Agreements of 1954 and the war between North and South Vietnam] with the resulting displacement of the population have altered or destroyed to some extent

(depending on individual experience) many of the Vietnamese characteristics and values. Political instability and the introduction of foreign political ideologies, Western technology, and civilization have also contributed to the process of change in terms of traditional values and culture. (Thuy, 1976, p. 13)

The various foreign influences on Vietnam include the Chinese, French, Japanese, and Americans (For further reading on these foreign influences consult: Coedes, 1962; Duiker, 1983; Haines, 1985, pp. 196-199; Keyes, 1977; Karnow, 1983; Marr, 1981; Steinberg, 1987; Taylor, 1983; and Woodside, 1971).

A critical factor in the Vietnamese identity is the history of Chinese immigration and domination in Vietnam. The process of Sinicization began in the second century B.C. and continued until the tenth century A.D. Kitano (1988) claims that, "the Chinese influence has been long and pervasive, yet relationships between the two cultures have seldom been positive" (p. 138). Lac, in the life history interview, details extensively the relationship between the two cultures. Although, the Chinese-derived cultural development has given Vietnamese tradition a distinctive cast (Keyes, 1977).

Importantly however, the inherent Vietnamese character allowed them to retain separate and distinct cultural identities: "The Vietnamese have shown their exceptional ability to learn and adapt while maintaining their culture

identity" (Tepper, 1980, p. 16). In other words, the Vietnamese were capable of accommodating to their changing circumstances and turbulent history (Haines, 1985). The Vietnamese always managed to maintain their national identity throughout all these foreign dominations.

The Traditional Vietnamese Family

While the Vietnamese continued to look towards China for cultural models such as Confucian-based Chinese traditions, they also developed their own sociocultural traditions. A most distinctive characteristic of Vietnamese culture is the active role of the women in Vietnamese society. Tepper (1980) notes that

In theory, a Vietnamese female is supposed to be as submissive to male authority as her Chinese . . . sisters. However, there is a great difference between theory and practice. Vietnamese females--known to be the "home ministers," or noi-tuong--are actually on equal footing with their husbands. All important decisions in the family normally involve the participation of both spouses. (p. 29)

At the root of Vietnamese culture is the family. The family is the basis for all social and cultural life and is considered the most important value system. Unlike the typical nuclear family in the United States, the Vietnamese family is an extended one. Thuy (1976) asserts that

The Vietnamese family has been so indispensable for the existence and survival of Vietnamese society . . . that it has been said without exaggeration that if anyone wishes to destroy that society . . . he must first destroy the family. (p. 22)

Notwithstanding,

Not only are the Vietnamese deeply attached to their family, they are also strongly attached to their land, native village [Lac expresses this belief in the concept of "que huong" in the life history interview], ancestors' tombs, etc . . . Because of all these strong attachments, Vietnamese usually do not wish to leave their villages or home towns. This is one of the main reasons why immobility is a Vietnamese characteristic in contrast with the dynamic and constant mobility of Americans. (Thuy, 1976, p. 19)

Traditional Vietnamese Characteristics

In general, the Vietnamese are characterized by their adaptability, flexibility, pragmatism, and ability to withstand hardship (For a more in-depth discussion of behavioral patterns and social conventions of Vietnamese society see Thuy, 1976, pp.33-59).

Specifically, the Vietnamese character is typified by their maintenance of social distance reflected in their social and family hierarchies which in turn is reflected in their language. This is due, in part, to the fact that Vietnamese are more "concerned with status than wealth" (Thuy, 1976, p. 49). Traditionally,

the family hierarchy is based on one's relationship to other members of the family in terms of sex, age, generation, paternal or maternal side, and marriage. The Vietnamese language is equipped with a complex system of kinship terms reflecting clearly one's relation to others in the family . . . The social hierarchy uses an equally complex system of forms of address and titles based on sex, status, age, and occupation of the person being addressed as well as one's relationship to him or her. (Thuy, 1976, pp. 49-50)

Religions of Vietnam

Religion has played an important role in influencing the Vietnamese sociocultural history. Vietnam has a tradition of religious tolerance. There are many religions which have had an influence on Vietnam: animism; Buddhism; Taoism; Confucianism; Catholicism; Hoa Hao; and Cao Dai.

Crucial to reinforcing kinship ties was the practice of animism:

Ancestor worship and hero veneration were highly developed only in Vietnam, where they constituted a regular part of everyday life. There, all news of all important events was communicated to the souls of ancestors. The primary function of tutelary, ancestor, and associated observances was to emphasize, by regular performance of rites, the stability, and identity of place and the immutability of family and hierarchical connections. (Steinberg, 1987, p. 19)

Steinberg (1987) has observed that in traditional Vietnam

the ancestral cult was designed to keep the family united as an eternal cooperation and to supply each family with a gallery of paragons from the past whose memory might improve the behavior of living. (p. 70)

Vietnam is predominantly a Buddhist nation. Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam in the second century A.D. and spread by Chinese and Indian monks (Steinberg, 1987).

Traditionally, Vietnamese practice Mahayana, the Chinese school of Buddhism, involving the teachings of sufferings endured by mankind and the unending cycle of life.

Repeatedly, Lac's life history reflects this Buddhist notion. In Vietnam, Buddhism is undeniably intertwined with Taoism and Confucianism.

Another important sociocultural source of influence is Taoism. Taoism, "provided a way of life by which man attains harmony with nature and with the mystical currents of the spiritual world" (Vinh, 1990, p. 115). Taoism has also provided ceremonies of worship and consultation of horoscopes. Taoism has lent a superstitious edge to the Vietnamese character. Lac speaks of how his parents could marry because his father's horoscope was a dragon and his mother's was a phoenix. This was a lucky and good combination of signs that allowed them to live in harmony. The principal teachings of Taoism are harmony between mankind and nature.

A profound sociocultural source of influence on the Vietnamese human development is Confucianism. Confucianism had its roots in China and spread to Vietnam. Confucianism is a system of ethical and political doctrines; it is not truly a religion, but rather a religious philosophy or code of social behavior (Thuy, 1976). According to Confucianism the social and family order could be attained by the proper respect for authority with the social hierarchy and adherence to social rites. Essentially, "Confucianism meant that the family and lineage were the foundation of Vietnamese life" (Steinberg, 1987, p. 70). An intricate part of Confucianism was social order:

Parents were the front line of defense of all political and educational authority. Pious children had to abstain even from publicly uttering their parents' personal names, as a sign of respect. Not surprisingly, filial piety was the . . . supreme Confucian virtue . . . It required that children care for their parents when they were old and make recurrent sacrifices to them after they died. (Steinberg, 1987, p. 70)

Upon exodus from Vietnam many elderly people decided to remain in their homeland. Respect for the elderly is a widely accepted and sanctioned value in the Vietnamese culture. Lac's remaining grandparents chose this path. The other less fortunate elderly Vietnamese who chose to come to America with their families have suffered from severe psychological stresses. These are due to the obliteration of their previous social order and the diminishing lack of respect from subsequent generations.

Although not widespread as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, Catholicism has influenced the Vietnamese way of life: "At present Catholicism has an estimated two million followers" (Thuy, 1976, p. 11). It should be noted that there are other religious sects such as Hoa Hao and Cao Dai. Most importantly though,

By and large, the Vietnamese do not follow one religion only, but a mixture of religions and religious philosophies. If a Vietnamese is a Buddhist, he not only practices Buddhism, but also observes Confucian rituals and Taoist teachings, or may even strongly believe in animism. A Catholic might worship his ancestors and believe in the existence of spirits. (Thuy, 1976, p. 12)

Ethnicity as an Adaptive Mechanism

Keyes (1981) proposes a theoretical approach to the study of ethnic change that can be directly applied to the "refugee experience":

Ethnic change . . . is a dialectical process that begins when people experience a radical shift in their social circumstances (when they migrate to a new society . . .). As people evolve new patterns of social adaptation to their changed circumstance, they begin to reassess the saliency of the cultural basis of their identities. And, as new cultural meanings are given to their identities, they also develop social patterns in accord with the premises of their identities. (p. 3)

Keyes (1981) develops an approach that takes into account both the cultural and social developments of ethnicity.

Ethnicity, according to Keyes (1981), "derives from a cultural interpretation of descent" (p. 5).

The concept of culture can be defined as:

A system of symbols, widely shared in a population, learned through and dependent upon language, the communication of which occurs in a social context and is established as convention and tradition, functioning as an orientational framework for behavior, thought, and feeling. (Remenick, 1981, p. 14)

Culture is the most viable means of adaptation. Culture becomes an adaptive mechanism employed by people living in particular conditions (Keyes, 1977). Vietnamese refugees use their culture as an adaptive mechanism of survival in the host environment as they begin to acknowledge and confront the loss of their native country and as they begin to "reassess the saliency of the cultural basis of their

identities" (Keyes, 1981, p. 3) and redefine their ethnic identity. Therefore, culture becomes a vehicle for the social transmission of ideologies, religion, behavior, values, etc. in the host environment.

Hence, ethnicity is a cultural construal (Keyes, 1981) of descent and is learned. A major source of ethnic identity, "depends upon experiences and actions of mythical ancestors . . ." (Keyes, 1981, p. 8). This need for a collective identity is found in the legendary origin of the country of Vietnam involving Lac Long Quan [the dragon father] and Au Co [the fairy princess mother]. The Vietnamese identity, then, becomes enacted in dramatized myth: "Intense suffering experienced by ancestors of a people have also been subject to symbolic interpretations and made the foundations of ethnic identities" (Keyes, 1981, p.9). This is evident in the turbulent history of Vietnam and especially for those refugees who fled Vietnam. Thus,

the symbols of ethnicity . . . serve to establish for an individual sense of survival, a sense linked to the continuity of the groups of which he or she is a member of descent. (Keyes, 1981, p. 9)

Appropriately DeVos and Romanucci-Ross (1975) define ethnicity as

a feeling of continuity with the past, a feeling that maintained as an essential part of one's self-definition. Ethnicity is also intimately related to the individual need for collective continuity . . .

Ethnicity in its deepest psychological level is a sense of survival. If one's group survives, one is assured of survival, even if not in a personal sense. (p. 17)

This mode of survival has resulted in

their collective ethnic identity vis-a-vis non-Vietnamese, [being] very, very strong. It is first of all an identity born out of conflict, initially with the Chinese, then the French, the Japanese, and the Americans. Vietnamese identity is intimately tied to the history of conquest and re-establishment of autonomy that surrounds this conflict . . . Most Vietnamese refugees have known no other life than war . . . Consequently, Vietnamese have evolved a very idealistic picture of what it means to be Vietnamese. (Tepper, 1980, p. 175-176).

The most important organizing principle among Vietnamese refugees is ethnic identity. It becomes apparent that ethnic change is a process that allows refugees to adapt to their changing circumstances. Refugees use their experiences to help make sense out of the host environment. Because of their turbulent history, Vietnamese are an adaptable and resourceful people; they may accept some host society norms while retaining what is most valued in their cultural systems.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

I intentionally selected the life history method as a vehicle (Beck-Coulson, 1989) for the collection of biographical material to illustrate the sociocultural dimensions (Mandelbaum, 1973) of the Vietnamese refugee experience.

In particular, the life history method is employed as a "biography, as the history of an individual person . . . ." (Langness & Frank, 1981, p. 10). Therefore, the life history method as a biography is a collaborative effort between the researcher and narrator to record "how the individual shapes or perpetuates the culture" (Langness & Frank, 1981, p. 73). The life history method while serving the purpose of recording and collecting the memories and experiences of the individual narrator, alternatively serves the purpose of "ongoing soci[ocultural] . . . history to life, revealing its significance and meaning for individual human beings and thus giving it meaning" (Hoopes, 1979, p. 53).

Thus, the "refugee experience" should not only be understood in terms of the unique historical events of 1975, but also as a biographical means to depict the fundamental redefinition of a Vietnamese ethnic identity distinctive of a first-wave refugee who came to America as a child. This

segment of the population has been overlooked in favor of two other groups: the "model minority student" who was a product of this first-wave generation; and the "boat people" who began arriving in 1976.

The first-wave refugees who came to America as children were a neglected population; the published materials surrounding this group do not acknowledge the fact that this particular group has not come to terms with being in America. Lac Van Nguyen questions his identity and is drawing upon his first six years in Saigon before his forced exodus.

Hence, the life history is used explicitly as a means to understand the issues of ethnicity surrounding a first-wave child. In retrospect, what began as a collection of life history material of a Vietnamese refugee has been transformed into an ethnicity study. This is due to Lac's astute perception and assessment of his sociocultural environment.

Strengths and Limitations of the Life History Method

James Freeman's (1979) work on the life history of an Indian untouchable undoubtedly affirms the strength of the life history method:

The unique contribution of a life history is that it helps the reader to understand the abstract principles of behavioral science as reflected in the lived

experience of the narrator. A life history at its best transforms lifeless abstractions of behavioral science into vivid personal accounts. (p. 396)

The life history method contains a quality that is not found in participant observation, questionnaires, or statistical methods. The life history method enables an in-depth account of an individual's experience and memories. In the case of Lac, the life history method is used to document an ordinary individual whose life has intersected with some historic event (Hoopes, 1979). The Vietnam War was the historic event for Lac. Specifically, "inner facts, revealed in the spoken individuals, are crucial to an understanding of full human and historical significance of an event" (Hoopes, 1979, p. 41). The spoken memories and ruminations reveal the inner sources and motives of the individual (Hoopes, 1979).

The participant observation method supplies a description of what is happening at a given moment; it involves the researcher "participating in the action he records, rather than asking someone to recall it later" (Hoopes, 1979, p. 9). By contrast, the life history method can capture the complexities of the mind, in particular the "refugee experience." A questionnaire or a statistical sampling improves only the accuracy, not the detailed richness of the information (Hoopes, 1979). Furthermore, a questionnaire or a statistical sampling would not reveal the

process of the formation of an ethnic identity, whereas the life history method can detail this process and provide human content which is the goal of my life history. Moreover, the life history can fill in the gap regarding the outlook of first-wave refugee children who came as young children to America; the other methods could not achieve this.

Recently the life history method has been criticized for its lack of an adequate conceptual framework in terms of a formal analysis:

Social scientist have used life histories to quite effectively focus in or answer particular kinds of questions concerning culture and personality . . . Despite these efforts, life history studies typically fail to integrate an adequate theory with a comprehensive narrative that brings to life the narrator as a person. Theory is developed at the expense of narrative or vice versa. (Freeman & Krantz, 1980, p. 2)

(For a more detailed discussion on inadequacies of the life history method see: Kluckhohn, 1945, pp. 102-103; Langness & Frank, 1981; and Mandelbaum 1973, p. 178).

I propose to address this lack of formal analysis found in the life history method by attempting to emulate the conditions diagnosed by Freeman and Krantz (1980) to produce a succinct life history:

We contend that life histories represent a distinctive class of data requiring a different and distinctive style of analysis. The cultural, social, and psychological data of a life history are not what make life histories unique . . . It is the life history in its entirety that is distinctive and that reveals

three important characteristics that other social science data cannot duplicate:

1. a configuration of experiences in a continuous narrative made vivid by concrete detail;
  2. a compelling quality;
  3. the process of taking the life history, which is an integral part of a complete life history . . .
- the third characteristic is indispensable for social science analyses and assessments of life histories . . . (p. 4)

In order to achieve this I have paid particular attention to "the process of taking the life history," in which I provide a detailed discussion in the sections of my thesis titled, "Relationship of Narrator to Editor" and "The Interview Process."

Creation of the Life History

The impetus for this project began in the Fall of 1989 while collecting data for an undergraduate class entitled, "Ethnographic Field Methods," conducted by Dr. James Freeman. Within the framework of this class and under the guidance of Dr. Freeman, I came to choose as a subject to interview, a first-wave male Vietnamese refugee. Moreover, the fact that Lac spoke English made the selection and communication more profitable. Lac is a perceptive young man, proud of his heritage. Quite naturally and fortunately for me, Lac was enthused to participate in this project. The previous data collection combined with the newly acquired material in my graduate studies has evolved into this particular thesis.

I have employed the conceptual framework developed by David Mandelbaum (1973) as an organizational tool for the life history because "it remains . . . probably the most important scheme available for gathering and interpreting the lives of others" (Langness & Frank, 1981, p. 72). James Freeman (1979) notes that

Mandelbaum uses three principles for organizing life histories: the dimensions of a life history--the biological, cultural, social, and psychosocial aspects of a person's life; the turnings--the major transitions that a person makes during principal periods of his lifetime; adaptations--the personal changes that an individual makes that contribute to his survival. (p. 375)

In this thesis I have chosen not to focus on the biological or psychosocial dimensions, but instead to narrow in and focus upon the social and cultural dimensions of Lac's life as they apply to the redefinition of an ethnic identity.

According to Mandelbaum (1973), the social dimension of a life history deals with "those acts of personal choice that are characteristic of the person's group and the common ways of working out recurrent conflicts of life" (p. 180). In Lac's case, "those acts of personal choice that are characteristic of the person's group," are those acts related to being a first-wave refugee who came to America as a child.

The cultural dimension of a life history refers to "the mutual expectations, understandings, and behavior patterns

held by the people among who a person grows up and in whose society he becomes a participant" (Mandelbaum, 1973, p. 193). Clearly Lac demonstrates "the mutual expectations and behavior patterns" held by his cultural group and the conflict that is created when in contact with the host environment.

Utilizing Mandelbaum's (1973) conceptual framework of "turnings" and further illuminated by Freeman's (1979) life history of an Indian untouchable, I have incorporated this strategy into my research:

Turnings, in Mandelbaum's scheme, are the major transitions that a person must make during the course of life. A turning is accomplished "when the person takes on a new set of people, and acquires a new self-conception" (1973:181). A turning can be either a gradual phenomenon or a single event and it may also be either improvised or in some way prescribed. Even though individuals' own perceptions of their turnings may not be the same as those of the investigator, their perceptions will, in fact influence their lives. (Langness & Frank, 1981, p. 72)

The "turning" or "major transition" for Lac was a single event--the Vietnam War. In turn, this event produced three other major transitions that are detailed in Lac's life history: leaving Vietnam; arrival in Alabama; and arrival in California. The Vietnam War forced Lac to "enter into fresh relations with a new set of people, and to acquire a new self-conception. In other words, this one significant event prompted a fundamental redefinition of the Vietnamese ethnic identity.

Crucial to Mandelbaum's (1973) scheme and pertinent to Lac's life history is the notion of "adaptations." An integral part of the "refugee experience" is the adaptation process that is used as a mechanism for survival.

Significantly,

adaptations refer to the continuous adjustments or changes that a person makes during the span of a lifetime. "Adaptation," says Mandelbaum, "is a built-in process, because every person must . . . alter some of his established patterns of behavior to cope with new conditions. Each person changes his ways in order to maintain continuity, whether of group participation or social expectation, a self-image or simply survival." (Freeman, 1979, p.386)

For instance, problems with adaptation experienced by Lac, a refugee in the host society, inevitably creates conflict.

The dominant American culture holds in esteem individual autonomy, whereas the Vietnamese culture values filial piety, part of the Confucian ideal. As these opposing values come into contact, conflict is created for the refugee. The conflict is dealt with through the adaptation process. As a mode of survival Lac has recreated sociocultural expectations of himself, his group, and American society. Importantly, "A focus on adaptation directs our notice both to changes he makes and to continuities he maintains through his life course" (Mandelbaum, 1973, p. 180).

Relationship of Narrator to Editor

The creation of a life history does not occur in a vacuum (Freeman, 1989), but rather is a collaborative effort between the editor and the narrator:

A life history . . . does not exist as an external datum, independent of time, place, and person, waiting to be recorded. Rather, it is the joint production of two or more persons with the right combination of personalities, interests, and biases who happen to come together at the right time and place for creating a life history. (Freeman, 1979, p. 392)

A critical factor, then, for the life history method is an established rapport. Rapport, "refers to a human relationship between [editor] . . . and [narrator] . . . It means that a basic sense of trust has developed that allows for the free flow of information" (Hoopes, 1979, p. 78). Fortunately for myself the narrative was a "joint production of two [people] with the right combination of personalities, interests, and biases who happen to come together at the right time and place for creating a life history" (Freeman, 1979, p. 392).

I met Lac Van Nguyen in the Fall of 1987 in a political science class at West Valley College. Primarily, what intrigued me most about this young man was his ability to express himself; on the first day of class during roll call Lac corrected the instructor when calling his name. The instructor had inadvertently called him "Van." Lac responded by a prompt demonstration at the board and a brief

history of the Vietnamese word ordering of names (see Nguyen, 1980, p.27). This concept had never crossed my mind.

Essentially I was surprised that Lac was from Vietnam. He appeared to be your "ordinary" American college student dressed in casual clothes. However, one close look at his face revealed otherwise; Lac was of Asian ancestry. I was perplexed by his American-sounding voice. Why didn't Lac have an accent if he was from Vietnam? My ignorance led to the truth. During a class project assignment I worked with Lac and was able to explore this question and many more. We were both receptive to sharing the knowledge Lac possessed of his culture. As our acquaintance matured into a friendship, so did my desire to learn more of Lac's culture.

The relationship between Lac and myself has allowed a wealth of information to penetrate my mind. "Biases, prejudices, predispositions, all manners of attitudes and likes and dislikes which we may not know we had are revealed when we . . . " (Hoopes, 1979, p. 4) participate in a life history collection. I have discovered another person's world view through the life history interviewing process: a cultural background consisting primarily of Buddhism and animism; the Vietnamese values of an extended family serving as a social institution; Vietnamese characteristics consisting of personal traits that include modesty and

humility; the particular forms of address in regards to a social hierarchy; and such Vietnamese customs as "Tet," the lunar calendar New Year. Conducting the life history has been a useful experience to better understand myself and the culture and society in which I live.

As a result of the work begun on Lac's life history in my undergraduate studies that has carried over into my graduate work, a viable rapport has been reinforced by a mutual trust, involvement, and commitment to this project. Asserting this claim, Langness and Frank (1981) state that, "this association greatly increases the reliability and the validity of the information in . . . life-history taking" (p. 44).

The Interviewing Process

Traditional historical constraints influencing the life history interview were enacted in power relations (Clifford & Marcus, 1986); that of colonizer to the native. Fortunately, "different rules of the game for the [life history method] . . . are now emerging . . ." (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 9). This changing historical process is reflected in the interview process with Lac. It is not a relationship of power inequalities consisting of dominance and subordination previously found, but rather has evolved into a democratic process.

Consequently, with the dissolution of colonialism (Geertz, 1988) significant factors emerge and influence the outcome of the life history interview. The factors are: circumstances under which the interviews are held; the cultural backgrounds of the narrator and the editor; and the age and gender of the narrator and the editor. These factors are an integral part of the interview process and affect the outcome.

An important transgression of the changing nature of the previous imperialist atmosphere has resulted in a different quality of the life history interview process. Now, "the interview process is an indirect means by which one can observe a culture other than one's own. It is the most direct method for learning a person's emotions, judgements, attitudes, and motivations" (Bowen, 1983, p. 30).

The circumstances under which the interviews transpired were directed by Lac. Lac chose the library [at San Jose State University] as our meeting place for all of the interviews. This meeting place had an interesting effect of neutrality during our interviews. This intellectual institution placed us on common grounds. However, upon reflection, it becomes clear that Lac is doing the teaching and I am there to learn. Nevertheless, "the justification for [the editor's] . . . presence is [the editor's] . . .

role as a critical, helpful questioner aiding in recovering the useful past" (Hoopes, 1979, p. 92). The particular set of circumstances encouraged Lac to speak freely, whereas another environment such as his home would not have produced the same results.

Since interviewing is a two-way process, a transactional nature, the respective cultures of myself and Lac undoubtedly influenced the interview process. Traditional behavior patterns indicating good social conduct of the Vietnamese character (Thuy, 1976) includes politeness, modesty, humility, pragmatism, lack of direct eye contact when conducting a conversation. Generally speaking, these basic characteristics will remain (Thuy, 1976), but the "refugee experience," as part of the adaptation process has diluted the maintenance of Lac's traditional behavioral patterns. Interestingly, in Vietnam, maintaining direct eye contact would be considered impolite. In the United States, for example, it is acceptable and considered good social conduct to maintain eye contact during conversation. Lac is able to maintain direct eye contact without hesitancy. This is a result of Lac being a part of the first-wave refugee children who came to America as young children and have adopted the social mores of American culture. Moreover, worth acknowledging are the similarities between our two cultures. Lac on several

occasions proceeded to remind me of my Italian ancestry and the importance of family in the Italian culture as well as in the Vietnamese culture. Furthermore, the Italian culture holds in esteem such values as sacrifice and self-sacrifice, honesty, and modesty as does the Vietnamese culture. These cultural attributes lent significantly to the rapport between us. The interaction of our two cultures resulted in an ethnicity study.

In addition to being sensitive about how a person's presence, cultural or otherwise, might be biasing the narrator's words, age and gender could influence the outcome of the life history. Importantly, age and gender did not impinge upon the outcome, but rather enhanced the dialogue between us. I am a few years older than Lac and female. This set of factors worked towards the advantage for both of us. In the traditionally status-conscious Vietnamese society I would be considered "chi," or elder sister. But as the result of the "refugee experience," Lac is not "em trai," younger brother, but rather becomes an equal, a colleague which allowed the free exchange of information.

These factors of circumstance, culture, age, and gender definitively affected the outcome and is obvious in the transcription itself.

At the outset I tackled this project as I would any other scholarly project. Before conducting the interview I

obtained a "Human Consent Form" from the Graduate Studies Office detailing to the narrator what the narrator's rights were. Lac received a copy of this form and has the option to withdraw at any stage of the research and writing.

During the Fall of 1990 and the Spring and Fall of 1991 interviews were collected and completed. The interviews were conducted in English and recorded on a cassette tape at the library. Notes were taken simultaneously to facilitate the transcription afterwards. The tape-recorded interviews were used to preserve the individual's life story in his own words. Most interviews lasted from one hour to two hours occurring on a sporadic basis. Sometimes we would meet weekly, twice a month, or once a month depending upon our schedules. The beginning series of interviews concentrated on a biographical sketch. I also inquired about economic, social and cultural adjustment. Various questions were asked about attitudes and behaviors as well as follow-up questions about changes in the life of Lac. Most sessions were in a relaxed atmosphere. However, our first few sessions were unsettling because of the use of the tape-recorder and our self-consciousness about its use. To alleviate this problem, as I was setting up the apparatus, I initiated a casual conversation and had Lac and myself listen to ourselves after a few minutes of conversation.

An important aspect of preparation was gathering equipment together to make sure it was functioning and having extra batteries and tapes available. The purpose of collecting the interview with a tape recorder was to preserve the accuracy and integrity of the spoken words. I discovered that listening to the tapes afterwards was an invaluable tool for improving future interviewing skills.

I read all the pertinent information regarding life history taking and developed a neatly organized chronological set of questions ranging from childhood to young adulthood. Basically I ignored a most crucial element--that a human being was involved and that this mere fact could profoundly affect the outcome of the project. My belief was that I could ask a specific question resulting in a specific answer. I would ask Lac, "Where were you born?" and Lac would simply respond, "Saigon." At the most he would give a brief description to the question being pursued. This was not the case. It became evident that empathy was needed. "Empathy requires the desire and ability to take the [narrator's] . . . point of view, and that requires the ability to be objective about yourself" (Hoopes, 1979, p. 96). Lac elaborated far beyond the questions asked. These elaborate discussions created a dilemma for me. On one hand, I was fortunate in that Lac possessed such a knowledge and enthusiasm of himself, of his

native country, and of his likes and dislikes of American culture. On the other hand, this created chaos because there was no chronological order.

Consequently, I believe, this fact was a direct result of my own ethnocentric bias that Lac would follow my set schedule of questions. I attempted to resolve this dilemma in an empathetic manner. I followed what Hoopes (1979) calls the open-ended interview. At times, Lac appeared to be rambling. I had to allow for the possibility that he was getting to the point in his own way (Hoopes, 1979) and it turned out that he did. So I constructively tried to get Lac back onto the subject on hand.

Editorial Decisions

Although traditional historians do not condone editing the transcript, I opted in favor of doing so. The purpose of editing Lac's narrative was to increase its readability. An appendix has been added to include a sample of the narrative text so that the reader may view the original text to see that the editorial decisions do not detract from the authenticity of the narrative. I have tried to remain as faithful as possible to Lac's actual words in order to convey to the reader the flavor of Lac's speech (Kikumura, 1981) and to encourage a better understanding of him as an individual.

By utilizing Mandelbaum's framework of "turnings," I was able to put Lac's life history into chronological order. It is for the sake of clarity and cohesiveness that I manipulated the narrative into an essentially chronological order. Freeman and Krantz (1980) note that

In a number of significant respects, a narrator's account for his life history, as elicited by the promptings of an investigator, or as affected by his translations and editing, undoubtedly constitutes a rearrangement if not alteration of the raw data of the facts of a life history. Nevertheless, this does not prevent the final result from being a faithful portrait of the narrator. The contributions of editors or investigators who collect life histories can be compared with those of the photographic artist who produces a portrait of his subject by controlling the lighting and background in his studio and modifying the composition of the portrait in the darkroom by selective cropping, that is editing. (p. 6)

The frustration I experienced in the collection of the data has worked to my benefit; it has allowed me to explore my role as an editor. My aim was to produce an ethnicity study reflecting the "refugee experience" and the process of adaptation. Upon reflection, I realize that the initial contact to create a life history interview and the following months was a process of a mutual, intimate involvement that contained a certain degree of reactivity that affected each other's lives. Freeman (1979) notes that "the role of observer thus is a crucial component of a life history." No comparison of life histories is possible without knowledge of the editor's perspective and values that influenced the final form of the history" (p. 393).

What I have learned

. . . is that through the work of writing about lives
. . . we can humanize ourselves. The acts of empathy
that arise in attempting to understand the reality of
people sometimes very different from ourselves can be a
transformative process. Such acts of empathy, whether
successful or not in actually simulating the other
person's experience, help us to break down the barriers
of ego and identity that give us each the illusion of
somehow standing separate and apart from the flow of
human consciousness through the millennia. (Langness &
Frank, 1981, p. 154)

CHAPTER IV

LIFE HISTORY

Memories of Saigon

Every morning I would wake up and my mom would give me change and I would go down the street to get fresh hot French bread that was made every morning. I would get that and bring it back. The rest of the day I would toss down in front of the porch. I would just sit there in my shorts and my white tee shirt with my hair all combed and stuff. also, I would have my sandals on. I would go down to the pond and play with my friends and take a shower out in the fresh rain or visit my family. I thought nothing was going to interrupt that.

My memories of Vietnam are centered around my neighborhood because I never really traveled far from my neighborhood. I always remembered when I had free time I would go down to the pond by my house where other kids on the block would go swimming. Or I would sit on the front porch and observe daily life go by. I remember all the neighbors were very close.

Our family was really well respected in the area. My dad had a very good job. Income was no problem. My dad was one of the common men. What I meant by that was my dad was in the business world and yet he was down to earth. That's why the people around the area really loved and respected

him. They even gave him a nickname which referred to him as a hero in this one story. My dad was kind of like the self-appointed mayor of that little block we had. He was in charge. Everybody knew that. His nickname was "Thanh." Thanh in Vietnamese mythology is always a hero's name. So they called him Thanh. They always call him that, even though it's not his real name, but it's just an honored name, to give out of respect. Some people, today, when they see him they know him by that nickname. So he was kind of like the right-hand man. He was a foreman for a lumber company in Vietnam so he got to travel a lot up in Vietnam, North and Central. He'd come home late at night. He'd never see us usually except on the weekends. He would party with the people. He always told me it was very important to party with the people who are at the same level as you, but also who are lesser than you. That way you make friends. You want to show them that you are no better than anybody else. When he would come home late from work, several of the poor people would sit around and drink in the bars and they'd see him and ask him to join them. He would join them gladly just to say that he was no better than them. So that's how he earned his friends, his reputation and he was always good for his money. Sometimes he would run out of money and he would say put it on my credit. People would

always trust him because he was such an honorable man, he still is. When he doesn't pay up, two weeks later that night my dad would come to the guy's house and say here's the money and he kept his word. In Vietnam you keep your word. You have a very nice reputation then people respect you and they trust you. Trusting is the most important thing. Then people will always do you favors for you, out of love, they can trust you. My dad also taught me that whoever your enemy is, mightier or lesser, get to know them real well, play their games. If you can understand them, you can win them. Even from your enemies you can still learn. So really it's something like a tradition that's been going on and still continues today that a man's word is honor and people live by that. It's a fond memory.

As far as the sites, all I saw was Vietnamese all around me. That's all I knew was "blackheads." My cousins were very close with my family, not only in terms of relations, but also in terms of geographical location. They all lived in the same neighborhood, practically the same block.

My aunt, the first thing I would see was her. She was this humongous figure. She's still big today--physically big. She's not fat or anything, just tall. This is my mom's sister, the oldest in the family. Then I would go further down the street to my uncles both on my mom's side.

Then a little further down the street lived my other uncle on my dad's side. My sister, the oldest one was already married when I was born. So she lived in a house by herself. She had her own maid and everything so she was well-off. So that's what I would remember about my neighborhood.

The smells, one of the smells I would remember would be my grandmother's betel nut. Whenever I got next to her on her shoulders or her knees and she was tossing me on her I would get next to her breath and I would smell the betel nut and it would smell nice. It's like tobacco. They would chew it and spit it out and it's all red. Very traditional Vietnamese did this. My mom and dad don't do this. So I remember that smell. When I think of that smell I think of grandmother. And speaking of my grandmother that's the only one I had then, my "Ba Noi," which is my father's mother. My "Ong Noi," which was her husband and my "Ba Y" and my "Ong Y" died before I was born. They died very young as a matter of fact, even when my mom was young. So I grew up around my other sets of cousins only having one grandmother, the matriarch of the whole family practically. When we left she didn't leave with us because she thought she was too old. She couldn't bare to live in another country because Vietnam was all she knew. She says that to this day it was best for her to stay.

Ba Noi lived with my uncle, her son, my father's younger brother, my "Qua Quit." His name was "Quit" which was like tangerine. She was the one that named all my fathers and brothers these citrus fruits or fruits. Very "Nam Ke," a very southern-like tradition. I like it because it's less poetic and not scholarly like the Chinese world. People who live in the city would try to, who knew Chinese culture would try to name them after the "Nho" word. "Nho" was the language like Cantonese and Vietnamese put together in ancient times when the first Chinese were living in Vietnam. So my grandmother would name all my uncles that name because she was down to earth.

My father was born and lived in Bien Hoa. It was a little town on the outskirts of Saigon. I was born in Saigon and raised in Gia Dinh. Gia Dinh was like a province. I was born in the city of Saigon, but I lived on the outskirts of Saigon, when I was growing up my five or six years. We moved a lot. In fact, I was the first one to be born in Saigon out of my whole family, then my brother was the second. My other sisters and brothers were born in other cities and provinces along with my cousins. When my father moved to Saigon then my other uncles started moving, following after him. They were born in Bien Hoa also.

Vietnamese just don't leave unless someone else leaves, then they'll leave with them. So most of my cousins were born in another city than Saigon.

My mom was from Ben Tre which was like a coastal city down next to Saigon, down the bottom. My mom lived in a little town in the country in the south. The place was popular for its beautiful women. My dad told me about this. So she was a country girl, he was in the city. When they got married they moved to Gia Dinh. My mom got pregnant right after they were married. She was seventeen, which was typical.

A lot of people in the Vietnamese and Chinese culture before they get married check out each other's animal--zodiac--the girl and the guy so they get along. You never want a tiger and a snake in the same house, that's very deadly. My father is a dragon and my mom is a phoenix, a bird, which is perfect. I mean, whenever you see a Chinese or a Vietnamese wedding they always have a picture of a dragon and a phoenix. My mom and dad got lucky. My dad had to fight for my mom because my grandfather being from East India was prejudice against them. My dad wanted my mother, he didn't care what animal she was, but it turned out for the best. Some people say they don't pay much attention to

the zodiacs or whatever. It's just a lot of magic to them. But it's funny because the Vietnamese would just say it's superstition.

The Vietnamese are very superstitious people. Not many Vietnamese people will admit it, but they are. I mean, I am myself. We all grow up being superstitious because our mom and dad have imbedded it in our soul and our life. Our livelihood is to be superstitious, to be aware of evil and to know good. We have beautiful sayings. Practically every situation we have a saying for. Like Americans say, "Out of sight, out of mind." We would say, "The farther your face is, the further away the love is." It's like, "When you're young you need your father, when you're old you need your son." There's a lot of good sayings we keep now.

Vietnamese kids when they are young do not pay much attention to a lot of proverbs and warnings from parents, but when they get older it all comes back. It is almost like it haunts them whether they want it to or not. That's the key to Vietnamese culture. We all need a cycle, without the cycle the culture cannot continue. The civilization would not exist. The Vietnamese did not write a lot of things down. It's word of mouth, folklore. Sitting around, our grandparents tell our parents and so on. That's how our traditions keep on going.

Anyways, apparently my parents met each other in one of the cities. Then they had a kid in other parts of the city. Then when things were getting better financially they moved to Saigon. That's when they had me and my brother.

We grew up in luxury. We had a regular western house with an upstairs. We were well off. So we had a pool table. The lake was right behind us. Walk out the front door and there's the boulevard and we'd have a French vendor over here selling hot bread. Every morning I'd get it with the change that my mom would give me. I was like four or five years old. I was used to it. I was thinking about it. I didn't look at it back then as some great achievement. But now considering four or five year olds in America they couldn't do that. But I was trained to do that. It was no big deal to me. It was another aspect that the Vietnamese tend to grow up more quickly. They become more mature than other people around the world because their society and environment makes them that way. It's a doggy-eat-dog world and it's apparent in Vietnam. It's survival of the fittest.

My other sisters were fine, but they weren't having the luxurious life like my brother and I did when I was born in '69 and upward everything was fine. 1968 was a bad year, I wasn't born yet. My father told me that was when the Tet offensive occurred when the Viet Cong and the communists came in and attacked every major southern city. Apparently

one of the rocket launchers hit the roof of our house and one of the shells ricocheted off my brother's toes. It really messed him up, but I wasn't born yet. Like my dad said that was the worst year because everything was hell and havoc. After '68 it was better. It was good for six more years until we left in 1975.

I just remember, the recollections I have of Vietnam growing up is that I saw people, people everyday. Kids, a lot of kids, always kids. Vietnam is nothing without kids. Kids are life. We have more kids than we do rocks probably. People in the countryside would have eleven kids and it would be no problem. The more kids the better. I'm the second to the youngest out of nine kids. There would have been eleven, but two died at childbirth. The two oldest are girls, third my older brother, he came and the rest. Next were four girls, then me and my younger brother. Then it stopped, I was lucky I was born, if you think about it. My parents could have given up and so no boys after four girls. In fact there were five girls, a girl died. They were thinking "Oh my god, five girls," so I was even lucky to be here, me and my younger brother. Unlike China and other countries they have kids for economical reasons--to help out on the farm. Vietnamese have kids because we have a saying, "The more kids, the more happiness it brings to the family." It's true. The more kids you had that's the more wealth you

had. That was my world, the world of family--family, neighbors, friends, and relations. It was a small world because I never travelled.

When I traveled it was to see my uncle in the countryside. My uncle lived in Thu Duc and I would get on my dad's moped and go there. My younger brother and I would be on my dad's moped and he would remind us how small we were when we rode. That was my moment to be in the countryside. Of course my grandmother she lived there too. So those were the two persons I would visit frequently. I would go there and just play around with my other cousins who were the same age. We would do a lot of boy things--like fool around and horse around.

I would go to my grandmother's little pond and that's when I met that little girl, that Amerasian girl. We were like buddies. I never really remembered her much until my mom would tell me from time to time. I don't really remember her because she was just a girl I played with. Now apparently she seems significant because my mother was about to engage me to her. My mom said the girl was very pretty and intelligent. She even began to call my mom and dad, "mom" and "dad." She was trained already to say that stuff. So apparently this girl seemed to be very significant and she lived near my grandmother's house. So when I came over there I would see her and we would play. I would see my

grandmother and talk to her and pay her respect. It was awhile back. I just don't remember what the conversations were like.

To me Vietnam was always sunny or it was raining, either hot or rainy. When I was sleeping it would seem to rain. There was a hammock next to the window. My mom would always put me in there for the afternoon, afternoon sleeps. I loved that. Sometimes I still do that now. Nighttime sleeps my mom would also put me in the hammock. I loved those times. She would put me in the hammock and sway me back and forth. The nice tropical breeze would come in and rain would come down.

Rain, that's why I love the rain. When I sleep in rain, it's from that feeling of exposure I had to rain as a kid growing up. At night I would sleep great in the rain. To me, most Vietnamese would think rain was a good sign. To me, when I see rain I associate it with normalcy with things being back to normal. That things are going to be all right--that I can sleep tonight, that my family will be there in the morning, I know Vietnam will still be the same. That's what I associate rain with. Also, if it rains on your wedding it is good luck. The rain in Vietnam is really very good. My parents even saved it in a bucket. Then they would drink it a couple of days later for their health. We took showers out in the rain. Kids would run around naked--

it was great. Vietnam was poor, but we didn't need showers because the rain was coming down.

That was the world I grew up in. The hammock was for falling asleep or afternoon naps. The bedrooms we had we shared with all my brothers and sisters in a big old mattress on the ground. I liked it, that's why I still sleep on the ground sometimes. These are memories that I kept with me that I still practice. In Vietnam I lived in a western style house with a downstairs and upstairs, kitchen and bathroom, the whole works. We slept upstairs, but on the floor with my brothers and sisters. I remember we had a bed here, a bed there. Me and my brother and sisters and so on all in one big room. My parents would sleep in another room, their own room. We had more bedrooms up there. We just used two. The other rooms were used for other stuff--decorations, storage, and so on. You know the Vietnamese don't believe in wasting room just for some little kid like Americans do--we've got to have privacy and stuff. Well there is no privacy in Vietnam. We're all one big family. Why would we want to be alone? Don't you love your family? That's why we're really close.

Everything we do has logic behind it. See I didn't really realize that growing up Vietnamese. Now that I'm older and more mature I believe everything we did had some kind of sense to it--to make us who we are and to shape us.

A lot of things we don't question why we do it, we just do it. But then you go "ah" that's what the shaping and forming of my Vietnamese character was like. For example, my dad taught us that the Vietnamese believe that the Vietnamese woman is like a lotus flower. This is because the lotus grows out of mud and dirt. The mud and dirt symbolize the world how it's evil and corrupt. But the Vietnamese woman within this world is still pure and beautiful, because the lotus is not stained by dirt. It's still white and smells nice. So that's basically what my parents and my culture tried to teach us. I was too young for my dad to tell me what it was to be Vietnamese. There was no need for it.

My father would teach me and my younger brother and my sister closest to me math everyday. I was four or five years old and he was teaching me math. How to times already--multiplication. I read the newspaper when I was five years old. I had a little table, opened the newspaper and read by myself and understood it. That's when I thought I was really smart. Then I had to come over and lose it because I have to learn English. What a choice to give up. My father would try to teach us to be smart. Like other Vietnamese families always trying to get ahead--you're not done with school, you're coming home and learning more. So it was that way.

My sister used to pick me up from school when I was in first grade. I was in a private school with a uniform. I was really scared going home by myself because there was this handicapped guy sitting in the garage with no legs and arms. I was real scared, I was petrified. So my sister had to pick me up. I remember that. I remember a lot of things. I was in first grade when I was five years old and when I went to America I was in the second grade.

Leaving Vietnam

We knew that the government was going to back out. The war was useless. There was going to be an end soon. The communist take over, they were getting near as after ten years of fighting, '64-'75. We knew it was a losing cause we couldn't help. America backed out already and the communists were coming in. My brother-in-law who worked for the government was the reason we got out. We were one of the lucky ones who got out in 1975. I came over in '75, the first exodus, the first-wave. I was six years old. There were a 130,000 of us who left during the first-wave. We went on a plane to Guam, to the airforce base, to settle down the first refugees. We stayed a couple of months. We were sponsored by a Catholic family in Alabama, where we went to live. A lot of Vietnamese families have the same story as I do. They went to Guam first or Indonesia or the Philippines. Then they went to Camp Pendleton or Fort Ord

in Arkansas. They went to whatever state whose sponsor took them in. Some Vietnamese never left California. Me, no I was in Alabama for almost a year then I went to California. Now most Vietnamese move out of their states. Especially from cold states into California. That's why we have a big population in California. So eventually everybody moves to California for a better climate, better job opportunity and to be more with the Asian community.

A lot of rich Vietnamese couldn't leave because they had no connections because the American government didn't see any reason for them to leave. Only people affiliated with the government, the former American government that helped Vietnam because they were in danger of being captured or killed once the communists arrived in South Vietnam.

A lot of Vietnamese at first did not believe Vietnam was going to fall because America was the most powerful country in the world backing us up. How could we loose? And still we wouldn't even if America wasn't there, but when America pulled out things went downhill.

My immediate family and cousins left. Originally my brother-in-law just wanted me and my younger brother to go with him first and my parents later. My parents said, "No we are all going together." So we all went together. My mom's older sister went to France. My mom's younger brother went to Texas. The rest of our cousins stayed back. They

couldn't go because they didn't have any money, no connections, too many people. So it took awhile like that. That's why you have the problem with the boat people who couldn't afford the money to get out. They would go anywhere they could. I don't know if you can picture what a boat person has to go through. It is the most tragic exodus in human history. The things that a boat person went through--to fit into a boat that's fit for twelve, but there are fifty people on it. My people went to every island and every country--Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong. We were that daring, that eager to find freedom.

Fleeing our country, which we had never done before in our history, to something we didn't even know about--America. Like the Vietnamese say, "I was ripped out of my mother's placenta, and the umbilical cord was cut from me." That's your mother country. It's not like we were Chinese or some immigrants where as we always left our country, that it was no big deal. But we never left that's the thing. I would say we were innocent. We were virgins on the aspect of fleeing from the country. We were brand new at this stuff. We never knew about leaving our country, we never expected it, even within the years the French and Chinese dominated us. We never left our country. We stood firm and fought. We won eventually. The first time we had to flee

was from our own people. That's rather ironic. I plan on going back there because that's my country. I believe in it and I want to help it. I see America as a cow, I want to suck everything I can out of that cow. Then I can go back and nourish back my country. I am very confident to go back there and learn what I have from America and give back to my country. Because I know my country is very special. The Vietnamese are great adapters. We've learned to adapt to everything. If we didn't we would not exist today. We take what we want from people and throw the rest away. We know what to use. We're a very pragmatic people. We're very flexible. That's the art of survival.

My cousins, my younger brother on my mom's side they live in Texas now. On my father's side his younger brother lives in Campbell. All three of us, our family moved to Alabama. Then my cousin on my father's side moved to California. My other cousin moved to Texas. Then my older brother and sister stayed in Alabama. They're still there now.

There's my mom and dad, my six sisters, my older brother, me, and my younger brother. All three families left. Nine kids left with my parents plus my brother-in-law who's married to my older sister which would make it twelve, then their daughter, my niece. So about thirteen people in the immediate family left altogether. Then my cousin who's

got eight left, because he's got six kids and himself and his wife. Then my other uncle who's got five kids, so they got seven in their family. So there were about thirty-something that left for the airport and went to Guam.

My dad keeps saying that it was a couple of days before the fall of Vietnam, which was April 30th, that we left. I was aware that I was leaving. My parents didn't say anything to me. They just got me packing and going. We took money and necessities--food and a lot of clothes and valuables. I didn't question when I was young, especially when you're Vietnamese you don't question your parents. You follow suit.

We left everything to our uncles and aunts who remained in Vietnam. They moved into our house. I could sense we were leaving permanently because I was in a van leaving my uncle and he was waving, standing there crying. When I saw that I knew something was wrong because we would leave each other and we would visit and my father and my uncle would never cry. When I saw him crying and waving I sensed something was wrong. So I was huddling with these bunches of people, these masses of people. These helicopters, these twin propellers, big old helicopters were waiting for us to board and to take us to the aircraft carrier so we could leave for Guam. So I remember all of that--the people huddling and a lot of commotion going on and a lot of tears.

I remember going to Guam, receiving food with my dad. We were living in this air hut. All the Vietnamese were sheltered there. We would go down the airstrip and get food from the cafeteria and bring it back. My younger brother who was maybe four and I was six. This meant that I was the man next to my father. So we did that.

I remember there was some Bruce Lee movie on the big old cinema. All the Vietnamese were watching it. Then they stopped the movie all of a sudden and said that Vietnam fell. That's when I knew we were there a couple of days before Vietnam fell. All the ladies around me started crying. One thing that stuck to me was everybody crying. It was strange. We stayed a couple of months then moved to Camp Pendleton in California. We got our physical check-up and our shots. Then I remember getting on the plane for the first time and going to Alabama.

Arrival in Alabama

I remember looking through this window and seeing all these white people and they were like American white people. Then the rest was history. I remember my life in Alabama.

We were adopted by this Catholic family in Alabama. We were sponsored. I don't know how they did it. Maybe we were picked out of the lottery or something--"The Nguyen Family Goes to Alabama." We were taken in. My parents knew we were getting sponsored. They were a nice family and

stuff. We went to church. I never cared for that. It was totally strange. There was a big old cathedral. I felt out of place. It was not my niche, my forte, it's not my atmosphere. We were the very first Vietnamese family in Alabama. I still have the picture. You should have seen us we're all together. We were the first Vietnamese family in Alabama. It was strange. You come to this country and they try to Christianize you and take away your thing. They say to your face they love your cultural aspects you bring over. It brings diversity to this country. But at the same time its like being stripped of your identity.

I was given the Christian name Matthew back in Alabama, my little brother was named Mark and my sister Sarah, see all these names. My parents never called me Matthew. Only white people called me by my Christian name. Every Vietnamese that I meet now I introduce myself as Lac. So that's a part of a chapter in my life, was that part of my Christian name. Later on when we moved to California and I went to junior college they would ask you to sign the documents with your official name, your name, your full name to register. I always used Lac Van Nguyen because Matthew has never been official.

I remember my uncle coming over every Friday to visit our house. We had this big old house that we had inherited from this man somehow. We lived there, big old hallways

like a bowling alley. They would come, they would live in another place. They would come every Friday to see us. That's how close we still were. Then my uncle, we wouldn't go to bed on time and we were all together sleeping in one row, same time, same thing like back in Vietnam--but now just with cousins--boy, girl, boy, girl. When we were in bed he would come by with a belt and hit us and we would cover our blankets over us.

There was a lot of discipline in our family. They call it love. I guess it is. You expect that being in a Vietnamese family, the father being the disciplinarian, but now and then my mom was the disciplinarian. She jokes around, she doesn't do it anymore, but back then a couple of years back she said if you guys don't behave she would get the bat out. That's what she always said. But she never meant it, but she said it anyway--a habit. If I was still around ten or eleven I'd still be afraid of the stick, I'd still run. But when I was fifteen or sixteen I started laughing at her. So yes there was a lot of discipline.

That's how Vietnamese solve things--discipline--physical discipline. I can tell you that about my dad too, besides my uncle. One time in Alabama my brother and I and my two cousins did something bad in the neighborhood and one of the neighbors reported it to my brother-in-law. He sent us to the bathroom and told all four of us to wait. He took

us out one by one in front of my aunts and uncles and my mother and father. He gave us a beating with a belt one by one in front of everybody. At that time I thought, "I hate you, I hate you." But it was all good for us and made us who we are.

Arrival in California

We lived for one year in Alabama then relocated to San Jose, California. Simply because I grew up in a white neighborhood I spoke the language of white suburbia totally. It's funny I would say English is like a first language because when you're young you acquire English like that. But when I first came over I really don't know, it's so indented in me that to now see people struggling it's surprising. It's because I never realized how difficult it was for some people to grasp the language, but I was very young and I was taught. I came into elementary school the same time as other American kids so what they taught them I learned too as well as keeping Vietnamese because of home. See I never thought I was unique that I was bilingual. It was a fact of life for me. I didn't speak Vietnamese because I had to, it's my language. I speak English because I was taught to and I was able to learn it quickly. See I absorb things differently than other people. I don't know how other Vietnamese people did it when they first arrived. But it just rubbed off on me, almost as if I imitated them.

So I get along better. I figure well if I speak the language like they do I'll move up the ladder quicker. Eventually it paid off.

When I first arrived in this one elementary school in third grade the kids thought I was either Chinese or Japanese or Korean. Because that's all they knew and I told my best friend. He said to the kids, "No, he's Vietnamese." And they said, "What's Vietnamese?" He explained to them that, "Do you guys remember the Vietnam War?" And they said "No." That's because they were too young to remember anything because the war was over by that time anyway.

That was a form of discrimination I first encountered. It was because people assumed I was the stereotype, that I was either one of the already known Orientals that had arrived in America. So being Vietnamese was really being different. Not only was I a refugee, not an immigrant, but from a country that America fought. So you had this stigma on you. There were only a few Vietnamese at school--my brother, and my sister. The rest of my older sisters went to another high school. So we were looked upon as different.

But I guess I'm really lucky because I hear other stories about other Vietnamese. We got along real well. Eventually my sister had a lot of friends and they accepted me. I felt real good at that point. I grew up in a lucky

neighborhood because the kids were not that prejudiced. We played football and everything together. They accepted me as their equal. I was better than they were. So I earned their respect. So I think one of the ways I assimilated real well was that I excelled. Whatever they did I tried to do better. Maybe subconsciously I was thinking I could do it because they did it. I never thought that they're white and I should be inferior because my parents never told me that. If they didn't tell me I didn't know. I guess it's also very individual because I wouldn't say every Vietnamese person came to this country young and started playing sports and trying. My younger brother and I were exceptions. We were very aggressive, very straightforward. I would hear it from time to time that people didn't like me. That was alright, because I knew they were prejudiced.

People would call me a "gook" and a "boat person." Me, being logical would say I'm not a boat person. I didn't come over on a boat. I came over on an airplane. I took an airplane to Guam. I didn't know what a boat person was until 1978 when people started leaving Vietnam in boats. Even then it didn't get to me until maybe I got into high school. Vietnamese would make up their own sayings-- "F.O.B."--"Fresh off the Boat." We would give our own little stigma upon each other; people from '75 and

people from the second-wave. That's the difference between our community. That was alright.

Growing up in California I didn't experience any real harsh discrimination or prejudice among the whites that I lived. It was real difficult too, because where I lived there weren't other minorities as well. They were all white. I didn't see one black, one Hispanic--nothing. There were some people who had Hispanic last names, but they were white. So I didn't know anything. Either you are white or black or Oriental. Everybody was white to me. I didn't see any other Asian kids. It's funny, but when I did see other Asian kids they were born in America. They didn't like me because I was aware of who I was. They didn't like it.

In a sense I rocked the boat, because I came over and told my story of my people. The Americans, the white people were impressed. Other Asian kids I would say deep down inside were envious--kind of like well we got nothing, we were born here, why are you coming and rocking the boat. It's bad enough being Asians among whites, now you come over here and you're saying you're a refugee.

From that point on I did not get along with other Asian Americans. It stayed with me, my younger brother, my sisters. We don't have too many Asian friends. We have Vietnamese friends simply because we're Vietnamese. I had

no other Asian friends simply because I had nothing in common with them. Because they would do things I thought were too Americanized, and yet I thought maybe I'm too Oriental. So there was the contrast between the two. I always remember that.

I tell you the whites weren't so bad. It was kind of funny. They weren't so bad. I was taken in. I had a lot of best friends that were white. I went over their house, slumber party--it was fun and I was the unique guy, I was different. They liked that. A lot of other Asians think that in order to be assimilated you must be accepted by other Americans and be like them and I found out no. My brother and I discussed that and said no we don't have to--keep your own identity because Americans lack that.

Interestingly, when I went to West Valley College in Saratoga they would ask you to sign the documents with your official name, your full name in order to register. I always used Lac Van Nguyen because Matthew's never been official. This was also the time I started reidentifying who I was again and I definitely asserted my name. In Vietnam I would be called Ong Lac. "Ong" is "Mr." Also I would be called a number. My mom and dad are both fifth in their birth order in their families. So in South Vietnam they don't use the number "1." Number "2" is the highest. The Northerners use number one. Anyway, my parents would be

called "Ba Sau"--"Mrs. Six" and "Ong Sau"--"Mr. Six." "Ba" is just another term for the elderly, but "Ong" means "Mr." and "Ba" means "Mrs." or "Madame." Vietnamese hardly use each others names unless you're family or you're very personal friends. Informally we just call each other by the number of what you were in your family. It's kind of strange. Or we would call you "Mr. first name." Like "Miss Laura." We still do that now. With my dad a lot of his friends he still doesn't know their first name or their last name. He mostly knows their first name. You rarely ask a person their last name in Vietnam unless it's given. Last names are not, we have a lot of common last names so it's no big deal. Unless you have a really rare name and you take pride in it.

Reflections on "Being Vietnamese in America"

My brother would say "Vietnam is the root of the tree. The country, the civilization, the Vietnamese are the stump, the branches are the countries of Southeast Asia, and the leaves are the tribes." So, indeed they all have their roots back to us. I'm not saying this out of mythological reasons or history. It's proven scientifically that there are these drums and pottery that have been found throughout Japan and Southeast Asia that are originally from North Vietnam. From the Don Son and the Hoabinh culture and the Lac Son. Those three sites in North Vietnam have uncovered

artifacts that go back thousands of years. That preceded what scientists thought they knew for awhile, but it isn't.

Rice cultivation was always thought to be in India, but they found that in North Vietnam it preceded a couple of thousand years before that. The oldest pottery in Japan was 10,000 years old. They found out that these potteries are originally from Vietnam, because the potteries in Vietnam are older than that. Bronze for a long time was thought to be from China, now they think it's vice versa. Vietnam had these beautiful ornaments, big bronze drums with nice designs on them depicting a totem bird. The Vietnamese believe that the bird is the biggest animal on earth. This is because when you're looking straight at the sun that's far away, the bird comes into view and as he flaps his wings out and cover the sun. So logically you think he's a big animal. We think the totem pole is our main thing, they have little shapes of warriors and amphibians. Now they found out the ancient Vietnamese are probably joyous people. We like to sing a lot. Our art design shows that we celebrate a lot. Cave paintings of martial arts, of javelin playing, of an arrow with which to shoot people with were found. We have this story about a turtle, the golden turtle. He would give the king of Vietnam this bow. The turtle said that if you shoot one arrow you can kill 10,000 enemies. If you possess this bow no one can ever take over

your country. They found out later that this bow existed in North Vietnam and if you designed it right you can shoot ten arrows at a time. That's over 2,300 years ago, that's a pretty ingenious design we had there.

So I think the Vietnamese, in so far as the world is concerned, are beginning to realize what a deep culture we have. Instead of looking at other cultures with deep admiration, we're beginning to say, "Hey look at ours, we are the progenitors." The reason I get off on this is that the more you know about your culture, no one can tell you wrong. No one can ever submit to you, and no one can ever say do this and do that because our culture is different. That's what the white man did to the Africans.

They erased their culture and didn't allow them to know who they really are. Stephen Beiko in South Africa said that if you know your history and you know who you are, no one can ever tell you any different. If you know your roots, no one can ever tell you any different. You can walk with pride and with accomplishment that your people, your ancestors the same blood that runs through me, runs through them. The blood ties are very important. The continuation of Vietnamese people is through our ancestors. Take for instance, the birth story of Vietnam. Now, good ol' Lac Long Quan, Lac by the way is the original name for the Vietnamese people, Long means dragon and Quan means Lord,

lived in Southern China. Now, the dragon to us in Vietnamese culture comes from the sea. The power comes from the sea. Indonesia and Bali believe the dragon comes from the sea, that's where the spirit and the power comes from. The East Asians like the Japanese, Koreans, or Chinese believe that the dragons come from heaven above. It is interesting why I say the sea because the Vietnamese believe we are originally from the sea. The Indonesians are probably our cousins. The Bali call their dragon, "barong," if you take the "b"-"a" out, the South Vietnamese call the dragon "rong." So it's very connected and their headdress, their ceremonies are very Vietnamese. I call it Vietnamese culture. It's spread all over Southeast Asia.

Anyway Lac Long Quan, he resided in Southern China. Southern China was originally Vietnam. He lived there and decided it was too hot one day. He didn't like it. So Lac Long Quan left Southern China and went down to Vietnam. The dragon-lord enjoyed the tropical weather. One day his eyes caught this beautiful fairy princess, Au Co, she was the daughter of the Lord of the Mountains of the Red Demons. Au, by the way is the tribe Au Viet which is your so-called Cantonese that you know today. They fell in love--they caught each other's eyes. They married. After awhile Au Co produced a hundred eggs. Now, the hundred eggs is symbolic, it is an allegory for the hundred Viet tribes. The Viet

tribes, those people were the Viet kids. Then one day, Lac Long Quan said to Au Co that they wouldn't be happy living together because he was a dragon and she was an angel. So they decided to split their ways. He took fifty kids to the sea and she took fifty kids to the mountains. That became our country. The people of the lowlands and the people of the highlands. Now the people of the highlands became tribes, the Montagnards. These tribes split up and went everywhere to live in Southern China, Bali, Indonesia, the Philippines, Burma, Malaysia. So everybody in Southeast Asia has their roots really in North Vietnam. But through isolation, historical, and geographical reasons their language is different now.

To me there was no such thing as a Vietnamese at that time, there was no such thing as Vietnam. We were a product of mixing. That's why our language is related to some others. Our history, our culture, our language is a mixture of everything. It is a product of ancient civilizations, people in that region at the time. We are the reminder of that time. That's why some doctors cannot pinpoint where our language came from. The Vietnamese have no problem with that. We know who we came from. Scientists say, "No we need more proof." We don't have a problem with that. We know the dragon and the fairy princess are our mother and father. Corny as it might sound, that's what we believe in.

Every culture needs something like that. Your identity is right there. Your identity is confirmed because you believe your mom and dad, your mom and dad believe their parents and so on. It's handed down from generation to generation. That's where you belong, you're strong. You are sincerely convinced that you came from the dragon and the fairy princess. We must keep going in order to survive.

History, history. That is intertwined. You cannot talk about Vietnam, you cannot discuss Vietnam, you cannot write about it, you can't watch it without history being involved, that's our life force. That is the way we are, the way we think, the way we act. The whole thing. It is a whole persona that is imbedded in our cultural history. It shapes us, it evolved us into who we are today. It's been very harsh on us. In other cultures I wouldn't think that history played too much of a big deal. They've been fortunate in their history in that they learned from their mistakes, but not from history, but as the saying goes, "If you don't know about history those who refuse to learn about history are condemned to repeating it again."

Well we don't ignore it at all, we have learned to master it. If we didn't we'd be dead by now. We'd be no country. Vietnam would be no civilization. We have to learn from our mistakes in order to move on. Everything we

do reflects our history. That's our teacher--history, and we're the students. We learn from history.

I was thinking if I was still in Vietnam I'd be finishing up college right now. I'd be successful in something, especially with my father's financial background. It was a waste for me to leave Vietnam. I could have been somebody. I could have done something, but lives change.

The rich people in Vietnam are now poor in America and the poor people are now rich in America. So things happen. America has a way of changing people. My family got lucky. We're not that well off and we're not that bad off either. We're fine. We didn't fall from grace as bad as other people who were as well off as us in Vietnam. So we were saved by the net. We're very fortunate to have what we have--blessings in our family. We've never really had any tragedies in our family so I am grateful for that.

Something's always missing though--family--we're not as close as we were because things happen, people go through their own things. America has a way of changing things. It doesn't give you a chance to be yourself. We're always trying to put this charade on and make you something you're not. I believe you really can't be full-blooded Vietnamese and act Vietnamese in this country. No one can. The same token for any other ethnics they can't come over here and develop and sustain their cultural uniqueness. It's

impossible and I think that's why I'm hurt inside by the fact that things are not the same. It's because I would like continuity of things and things are not that way and then I get hurt. It's like your world and that's all you know and if your world changes just a little bit just like your climate then you really feel a difference.

The beliefs and ideas that I've been conveying are from my father. He wants things to be the same again. He wants his place in society, to be somebody again. I always feel I have a mission in life for some reason. That I have this thing because I wouldn't be the way I would be or act the way I do unless I had some goal or fate that would meet me eventually. I believe that because I notice that in other Vietnamese and other people they can see a wonderful life in America. That is to just go to college and get a job, get married, settle down, that's it. I don't think that my life will be that simple where I'm just going to finish college and find a wife. No, I'd like to, but I don't think it's going to be that easy because my own personal character may not allow me to fulfill that criteria.

At times I think I'm unique from other first-wave Vietnamese who came over, but in some ways I'm the same. I've assimilated to this culture very well, there's no problem with that. I understand Americans probably a lot

better than Americans do. In that aspect I enjoy American culture to a certain extent and I'm also very resentful of American culture to a certain extent. I enjoy some of the music they have, some of the Americana that they show on television and their media and so on. I enjoy some of it, but other aspects I hate. Like how Americans are not family oriented, how they're not devoted to husband and wife. How they don't think family is important. How they're very promiscuous among themselves. There's nothing sacred in this country, virginity is not looked upon, it's talked about, but you know it's not stressed. I can't hack that. I'm really very old-fashioned in that sense.

And no I'm not like other Vietnamese from '75 in other parts because I'm still very much Vietnamese and I see things differently. I think I'm unique in a sense from the people of '75, who are my age anyway, because I don't think they can really grasp what's going on. I think they sometimes have a conflicting character among themselves on how they feel about themselves being Vietnamese or Vietnamese-Americans. I don't see that difference. I see things clear-cut. I see things I do, certain things I do know that's American. Sometimes I hate myself because I'm too American.

Well sometimes I'll do things certain ways that I know is not, that is totally un-Vietnamese. If it's American

then it is un-Vietnamese. It could be German. I don't know. But it's not Vietnamese. And sometimes I could really kick myself for that. It's like I'm letting my own people down and I shouldn't be doing that. I have this thing that I should be walking around and should be upholding my cultural foundation.

That's why I feel angry sometimes because I should be doing more Vietnamese things in the sense that I should be speaking more Vietnamese not only at home, but to any Vietnamese. Whether they speak English or not I should be speaking Vietnamese to them. I should know more Vietnamese culture, not just the history, not just certain customs, but pretty much every aspect of it. I feel myself being lazy and that's stupid.

Being Vietnamese is not settling for second best, that's what makes us unique among other Asians, why we've done what we've done in our history. Because if we had stopped and settled for second best we wouldn't be here. My people, the Vietnamese we could do more, we're capable of doing a lot more. And we're not doing it.

This country corrupts me as far as letting me be nonchalant and being totally laid back. Most Vietnamese are tense and sometimes I'm tense as most Vietnamese are. My younger brother, he's very intense. If you were going to interview him he would lay things out for you and say this

is Vietnamese and this isn't. These are the things you should and shouldn't do. We're very pragmatical, the Vietnamese are. We're very idealistic. If you don't do things a certain way then we think well that's not Vietnamese, you're not doing the Vietnamese thing. My younger brother he's very ideal. He has certain things he believes in. If you don't follow that area he's just going to ignore you.

You don't want people that are lower as far as intellectually or culturally to be weighing you down. But if you're like most people you want to move on and learn something every day. You can't be with people that are lower than you. I don't mean to be prejudiced in that sense. I just mean they can't help the way they are, but you can help if you want to hang out with them or not. It's up to you. You can't change them, that's fine, that's their lives, but you also have the choice and option not to be with them either.

That goes for Vietnamese too, my younger brother he doesn't distinguish, well he does distinguish between Vietnamese and Americans, but he doesn't take sides since he's Vietnamese. He's not that way. Like I said when he was going to business school he had a mishmash of different friends. Because you can always learn something from them and him from them. He enjoys, likes their company. I think

he's mature in the sense that he is impartial that he doesn't take sides. In certain things he take sides, but he will not take sides as far as sharing knowledge. He's very keen on that.

He's very keen on being Vietnamese if he walks with a white girl, a non-Vietnamese girl. He's very perceptive of how other people look at him and see what you are doing. My brother wouldn't want to show that he may be interested in a non-Vietnamese girl if he's walking with a Vietnamese girl because that would put the Vietnamese girl down or put that non-Vietnamese girl equal with the Vietnamese girl.

So that's a role most Vietnamese guys have to go through. If you were really Vietnamese you would probably do like my brother because they have this commitment almost, this code that you go by. I go by that code too. And it's a hard line to walk because you're trying to please your own kind, but you don't want to hurt the other people who are not your kind. I don't know if there's ever going to be a resolve or a compromise.

Compromise is a familiar concept in the Vietnamese culture, but it's not often applied. Either you give me what I want or I will fight you. Vietnamese hate compromise. Only in the safety of the family or the nation we will compromise to save pain and killing, but as far as

personal beings or belongings go compromise doesn't go. That explains for our quick temper.

Southern guys like myself and my brother and my cousins we're very quick-tempered. In fact we're known throughout the Vietnamese region as the quick tempered. "Ac On," is the word that they used. It means kind of like a bully, like a rascal that likes to look for action. At the same time we're kind of contradictive again. Contradictive is a word that I use most often throughout this whole thing. Southern guys are very laid back and relaxed and mellow due to the region and environment. We have an abundance of a lot of things so there is no reason to stress out or get all worked up.

It's this laid back attitude that can turn into a quick tempered volcano. I think that General Yap, one of the most famous generals of Vietnam during the war was known as the "quiescent volcano." That means that volcano could erupt at any minute. And my father is almost like that too. In the Vietnamese language when my father comes at you it's almost unbearable.

I am like my father in a lot of things, a lot of values and things that he has taught me as far as being very traditional Vietnamese, that comes natural. He wants me to continue that tradition, that heritage whether I live here or I live back in Vietnam. I'm grateful for that. I want

him to teach me all that. There's no other person I would want to teach me all that. He's authentic, he's traditional.

My brother has picked up a lot from my father, but he has also picked up a lot by himself. He studies and observes other Vietnamese and how they act, he's picked up their traits too because he thinks that's Vietnamese and I'm going to pick that up. To him anything that's Vietnamese is good enough. He's very aware of certain things that are Vietnamese and that are not. He's on guard. If it's not Vietnamese he's going to turn it down, he's going to avoid it. If he finds some Chinese words that are borrowed, he won't use that word anymore and try to substitute it with some other Vietnamese word. To him that's corrupting the Vietnamese language which he thinks is most beautiful. He'll come home and ask, "Do you know what this word means?" He'll say, "Look at the beautiful subjugation and adjectives we have." He's proud, very proud of the Vietnamese language. He thinks no other Asian language is like this, there is no equivalent. He's very content.

I often say I'm happy to be Oriental, but I'm fortunate to be Vietnamese considering the Chinese race to everybody else. I could have been Chinese, one out of five people in the world are Chinese. So the chances of being Oriental and being Chinese, the chances are pretty good. Vietnamese guys

are always keen on being Vietnamese. I don't care where they stray good or bad, there always going to know they're Vietnamese.

I can't explain it to you, it's the language. The Vietnamese language has a lot to do with the shaping of our people because when our fathers and grandparents and people are preaching to us that language is inherited to us and we take it and imbed it in our soul. It shapes us. It's like a reminder, like a little shining bulb over us saying this is Vietnamese and that's not Vietnamese.

Some Vietnamese girls are not very conscious of what they do. They're very conscious compared to other people, but when they're not conscious they're not being Vietnamese. A Vietnamese guy if he marries a non-Vietnamese girl he's still going to be Vietnamese and he's going to raise his kids Vietnamese. A Vietnamese girl if she marries a non-Vietnamese guy I wouldn't be so sure because then she's already rejected the Vietnamese culture by not marrying Vietnamese men.

A couple of my sisters have married white guys. They're still Vietnamese to their kids, but not to the extent that I would like them to be. But that's their lives. It's not my place to intervene and say well you're not raising your kids the way they should be. That's not my

place to say it even though I could say it. But there might be a fight and I don't want disharmony in our family.

My younger brother is very cold-hearted, he doesn't like my nephews and nieces that are mixed. He doesn't consider them Vietnamese because they are going to grow up white. Even my older brother who married a white girl, even though the father is Vietnamese, my brother doesn't like my nieces that much because they're not going to be Vietnamese. They might have Vietnamese middle names and last names, but they are not going to be Vietnamese. They are not going to have a chance, especially if they continue to live in Alabama and I can't disagree with him.

I love my nieces that are here though. I think it's funny the ones that are mixed are the ones that live far away from me. But then again I think that's white for you because they always move away from their family. But the Vietnamese ones are the ones that live around me and we're very close to my nieces and we train them to be Vietnamese. So you can understand the bias here. Now things would be different if my mixed nieces and nephews lived close to me because then I would be sharing my Vietnamese culture with them. Then they have a choice to be. They are exposed to two different worlds, but they're only living in one world,

the white world. So my nieces that are here I love them the most because I know they are going to grow up to be Vietnamese.

My niece, Khue, my brother said you know she is what other Asian Americans or other Americans hate to see because she is everything opposite of what people think Vietnamese kids should be. She's born here, she's intelligent, she's beautiful, she's witty, she's talented and she's tall. And I'm thinking to my self she is going to be somebody, but most important of all, is that she still be Vietnamese. If you have all this great stuff and you can't contribute to your Vietnamese culture, then what good are you? I'm glad my niece turned out the way she did. We trained her in Vietnamese history. She knows.

I want other Vietnamese parents to tell their kids to be proud of who they are even if they were born here. It's not their fault under the circumstances, but it does not stop you from being Vietnamese. I can't understand how Vietnamese parents say that they cannot raise them in that way. Well I say that's not true. A kid is under your roof for many years before he's out in the real world. Those years are forming years. You can shape them into what you want them to be. You can put a black kid into a white neighborhood he's going to be white when he grows up and vice versa. A kid's life is all he knows is mommy and

daddy. Mommy or daddy can do anything they want and the kid will follow. So I feel that my job, my brother and I, is to tell my nieces and nephews all we can about the Vietnamese culture.

There are many moments in my life when I am confronted with the question on how the Vietnamese community is going to survive in this ever changing society and I always wonder about that. We have a little saying, "We raise our voices only to be shot down." It makes me very sad. There's always going to be a vicious cycle. It reminds me of Buddha, because he says that the reason we suffer is because we want things and we can't get it then we suffer. But then there are other moments in my life that I'm very comfortable and I'm sure we're going to do fine. We have a good reputation so far. Of course people are going to lie and spread rumors, but that's expected.

I'll voice my opinion if I have to. I think there's no better spokesperson than I am. I mean that because I think for a Vietnamese guy to get up there and talk effectively in front of the Vietnamese community he also has to know about American culture and community.

A lot of us had to work hard to get where we are. We had to sacrifice a lot to get where we are. It's like my dad says, "If you were stupid in this life, you're going to die, so you better be smart and survive."

Reflections on Vietnam's Relationship with China

To begin with let's talk about something recently. The Vietnamese New Year, "Tet." Now you know the Chinese are known to say in the Cantonese dialect, "Kung Hei Fat Choy." Now I asked this one Mandarin speaker, Chinese speaker, how the term came to be. Well the mandarin came up with the fact that term "Kung Hei Fat Choy," in their own dialect and the Cantonese have just altered it a little bit saying, "Cung Hoy Phat Choi." Now I said does that mean, "We wish you a Happy New Year?" They say "No" the words, "Happy New Year" are not in there. Do you know what it means? It means to make a lot of money! There's no "New Year" in there.

But Vietnamese say, "Chuc Mung Nam Moi!" which means "Happy New Year." "Mung" means "happy." "Nam moi," "nam" means "year" and "moi" means "new." So it does mean, that there is an English equivalent to that -- "Happy New Year." The Chinese though, "Cung Hoy Phat Choi," means to make a lot of money. So you figure where their frame of mind is right there. Okay?

Another thing that I want to get involved with is this family thing. Now a lot of things have been said and written about the Chinese family and how other Asians are pretty much the same. Asian families are not all the same. Like Asian language and Asian culture is not all the

same. We're only the same because we're all Orientals as far as maybe some physical appearance and as far as some cultural and characteristic traits that we carry. You wouldn't say all Europeans are the same. The English their food is completely different from the Italian. Italian food looks like a garden, English food looks like one rose petal died in a sea of dirt. That's all I'm saying.

But to talk about the Chinese family, according to Confucius, must be close--the son respects the father and respects the mother. If the father is gone then the mother must respect the oldest son and so on. But I don't believe the Chinese family is as close as people think they are. Because if you look at their past migration pattern since ancient times the Chinese have always left their country. Now they have left their country and settled in other parts of the Orient. Vietnam is a great example, Thailand, the Philippines and what have you. They have stayed there. They say they will go back to China once they have made money. Very few historically have returned to China once they have struck it rich. They stay there and form a Chinatown. Now as far as love in the family they just bring back the lotus and have some opium and money. Opium in China means a sign of wealth. So if their son sends back opium that means son you're doing a good job, aren't you because you can afford this opium stuff. No matter how much

they love their parents, Mao Tse Tung was a great example, he disobeyed the rules that he was conducting at the time of the revolution--he killed his own father because his father took too much rice out of the storage.

Now in contrast, in the Vietnamese culture the family system is very close-knit. There's a saying in Vietnam. The first thing is that the man must take care of his family, second his village, and third his province, and fourth his nation. Now I've told you this before how can you consider taking care of your nation last on that list? Well it's simply due to the fact that you know in the time of crisis you will band together. It is an unspoken bond--you will stick together and fight foreign aggression. But first things first and everyday life is your family. You see your family everyday. Your family is harassed or attacked either by alien forces or domestic forces. Your nation is not always being attacked, it wants to stabilize and stabilize for a couple of centuries. If not longer. So what I'm saying is the Vietnamese are a very close-knit family. We have never left our country as the Chinese did. And even to this day I still don't believe the Vietnamese have left their country. It's the Chinese that have left from Vietnam.

My dad said something very interesting. He said the Chinese have left three times. I asked how do you mean? He

said first they left China to live in North Vietnam and second they left North Vietnam during 1954 to go to South Vietnam and the third stage they left South Vietnam during and after the war of 1975 to be in America with the rest of the world. They were the first ones to pack up and leave.

They don't have the concept of "que huong." "Que huong" means to remember one's native land, village what have you. Now we say "que huong" in America meaning we miss Vietnam, we remember Vietnam. But to tell you the real essence of the word "que huong," "que huong" back in them days means I miss my village. Most Vietnamese don't even leave their village. So in order to come over to America, 12,000 miles across, "que huong" is even a broader term now. So I'm trying to show you that "que huong" only meant that I missed my village. Now "que huong" in America means I miss my country. We never thought we'd say that cause we never thought we'd leave our country.

The Chinese don't have a concept of "que huong." It's unimaginable to them, it's acceptable, it's normal for them to leave. So why would I have a word to say I miss my village. The Chinese have always said that when I die whatever country they are living in they want to be buried in their native viillage. They never do that.

One of my dad's friend is Chinese from South China. He came to North Vietnam when he was about four years old. He

wandered off. He hasn't seen his family since. He just saw his family finally about a couple of years ago. He went back to China. But he wandered off. Four years old--his parents didn't care and stuff. He stayed in Vietnam. The Chinese there are so many of them. Like this one Chinese guy I was talking to. I asked him "Don't you get disturbed when you see your people do something that's shameful, embarrassing to the culture?" He said, "I don't care because there are so many Chinese, there's only a few who mess up." See there's a billion Chinese so what does it matter with a couple hundred thousand that are screwed up? That's how they think--big deal she's Chinese, she's a whore, or he's a gambler or he's a pimp, whatever game who cares--our Chinese culture is still intact. They're just a bunch of stupid asses that wander off the culture like a bad apple. They don't care. This is how shallow they are, anybody that speaks Chinese is considered Chinese whether you're a black or a white. My mom says if you speak Chinese they think you're Chinese.

In Vietnam if you speak Vietnamese you're still considered mixed if you are mixed. We never forget the fact that you're mixed or something else. Just because you're born in Vietnam and speak Vietnamese does not make you Vietnamese in the Vietnamese eyes. In Chinese eyes it does though. A great example of this is the Amerasian stuff back

in Vietnam. They speak Vietnamese, they understand Vietnamese culture, they eat, they do everything Vietnamese. They're still not accepted in our society because they are a legacy of something that was shameful plus the fact that they're very different. Now that's what I mean when I see when they say that something that Vietnamese do that are like bad or something, I say "No, they can't be Vietnamese." The heart and soul of the Vietnamese is that we're simple people, we're very simple people.

I had a talk with a friend of mine, she's Vietnamese, she's twenty-six years old, very pretty, she's a central Vietnamese. She was born in Nha Trang which means "House of the Moon." Her and I had a very deep discussion about the Vietnamese of Vietnam. We are a very simple people, we're very peasant-like, eighty percent of our people are farmers. What do we know about driving cars, about Western culture and so on? Only the people in Saigon and the major cities in South Vietnam know. They're the people who are over here in America. At the same time the people who are from those cities who left are mainly Chinese citizens. The Chinese seem to, tend to, move or locate to areas of businesses and businesses are in major cities not in the farms.

You won't find one Chinese living in deep South Vietnam or some god-forsaken village in North Vietnam or Central Vietnam either. Now they might carry some Chinese last name

but they in no way are affiliated with the Chinese culture. They think they're Vietnamese.

In fact a lot of our heroes who fought the Chinese during those days are mixed Sino-Viets. Look at their last names and the majority of them are Chinese last names but it shows you they took their sides their mother's sides. What is it about Vietnamese culture that people want to turn to it and throw away the so-called omniscient or all powerful Chinese culture?

If Chinese culture has so much to offer, why would they want to join the simple civilization of the Vietnamese who are just a bunch of rice farmers? Why is that? I'll tell you why, because it's the verbal again. When a Vietnamese person talks to you in his native language it's very precious because they call you something, they address you in certain ways that make you feel like you are Vietnamese and stuff. You want to do good by them, you want to prove your loyalty to them, to your mother culture. That's why you have a lot of Chinese in America who are from Vietnam who don't say they're Chinese anymore. Why is that? Because they still think and feel they're Vietnamese even though they don't have an ounce of Vietnamese blood in them. They think they're Vietnamese. It's apparent. Look at Chinatown in San Francisco and Oakland. A lot of the shops and restaurants are Chinese owned, but they have Vietnamese

words that means they are from Vietnam. They still want to attract Vietnamese customers you see. They know what they are doing, you can call that a business, good business, but at the same time you know where their heart lies too.

So no matter where the Chinese come from, they can be Chinese. But if he was born in Vietnam, on his birth certificate, on his records, and everything it says, every time another Chinese from China would say, "Where are you from?" He would say, "Oh I was born in Vietnam." He can't lie about that. He's always going to live there especially if his family has been there for generations. He can't even hate the Vietnamese even if he wanted to. You know what I'm talking about? He feels that well okay I'm Vietnamese like some you know Hispanics or some other Asians who live in America for generations. They think they're Americans. By the same token, the same thing with Vietnamese. But except it's a whole lot deeper because here people are so mixed up anyway you don't know where their loyalty or patriotism lies.

In Vietnam it's very clear-cut. Either you're with us or you're not. Le Loi, one of the great heroes who fought the Chinese in 1420, he told the people that if you're on my side right now that when I succeed, victory you will be

rewarded, but if you don't I'll cut your heads off and I will do other stuff once I get in power. He did exactly what he said.

Quang Trung or Nguyen Hue too, something he denied when he united Vietnam for the first time, he defeated two of the ruling dynasties in North and South Vietnam he attacked the Chinese and pretty much massacred 200,000 Chinese. He did not like them, he wanted to throw away the Confucian society. He thought that it was influencing Vietnamese culture, it was deterring the real essence of Vietnamese culture. He says the only time that we use Chinese culture is if we are doing business with the Chinese. Makes sense. Oh, he did some terrible things, but I love it. He would take his enemy and after killing them he would stuff them and paint them red and put them on statues.

Nguyen Hue [took the title of] Quang Trung which means "honest officer." It was so appropriate that he call himself "honest officer" [sic--"bright and loyal"] because he was. He was sick and tired of the people that were black mailed, corrupted in the ruling court. That he wanted to organize everything and again it shows you the Vietnamese character we're always trying to do good, very simple people, we're honest. Anything that we're deterred by is due to outside forces, mainly the Chinese.

The reason why we have gambling, casinos, prostitution, and drugs back in Vietnam during the sixties was because the Chinese were in Gia Long and Saigon. We didn't have any of that until the French came too. When the French came they pitted the Chinese against the Vietnamese. They knew we didn't like the Chinese yet they put the Chinese in power. When we were under French control we couldn't do anything about anything. They made the Chinese our boss. When the Chinese did that they promoted vice. During the Vietnam War you hear stories about the American G.I.s and these prostitutes and what not, they were all Chinese related. If you look at the pictures of the prostitutes standing in the streets they're Chinese, their last names are Chinese. If you look at these Amerasians and ask what their maiden last names are of their mothers most of them are Chinese.

These are facts that people do not acknowledge or recognize or do not want to recognize, especially the Chinese. The Vietnamese we would be protesting up against-- we don't want this crap related to us, do you understand that? It's like having a clean record, an all "A" student. If somebody caught you cheating, if somebody actually framed you for cheating which you know didn't do, you try to tell this to the teacher, he can't believe it because the evidence is there.

That's what the Chinese culture is doing to the Vietnamese culture. In essence, we have this spotless stuff, I'm not saying that we're angels, but the majority of Vietnamese are good people, we are farmers, we just want to take care of our families and have a good living and maybe go to heaven and worship our ancestors. That's it.

The Chinese culture is beyond that. They want to make money. They are into business. Their minds are thinking about ways of doing this and that. They are very creative people. They're witty, they're shrewd--anything to get ahead. Like my dad says they'll kiss ass to people in order to make a living. As long as he gets his money and he does his thing. Chinese don't care about all the crap they have to take.

The Vietnamese couldn't do that. Me, for example, my last five jobs if I don't like somebody, if they give me a bad notion or a bad attitude, I'm gone. I don't need this. This attitude of mine comes from my dad and the Vietnamese people. My younger brother is even worse than that. He won't even be in a room with people who give him an attitude. You either go fight them or you leave. The Vietnamese are very cocky in the sense that we don't take it and the Chinese do--that's a big difference. The Chinese will sit there and take these dumb stupid roles, they're not stupid. They want to make it appear like they are stupid so

in order to fool people. When something's pointed out and stuff, it won't be pointing at them because I didn't do it. See good old Chin there he was quiet and passive, he was doing his homework. Well Chin did something behind your back too that you didn't know about, that you didn't assume that Chin did it.

The Vietnamese don't even do that. We do it in front of your face. If I don't like you I'll tell you right now. If I like you I'll tell you. Vietnamese don't say that unless we mean that. The Chinese don't. Oh, they can lie like crazy and feel real comfortable about it, no guilty conscience.

Now this is just the guys I haven't even gone to the girls yet, which is worse. Like I said Vietnamese girls are the best, in a sense that every woman should be like the Vietnamese woman. They're faithful to their husbands or their boyfriends. We have thousands of stories of how faithful Vietnamese women are. We also have stories on what happens to a woman that's unfaithful. Vietnamese girls grow up conditioned listening to these stories and they know how to play Vietnamese roles. You're not supposed to hold hands [with men]. Vietnamese girls hold hands and some other Asian cultures do that too, but that's fine because they're not dikes, they're not homosexual. It's not like that. Vietnamese girls still hold hands here. Americans might

look at them like they're weird, but no that's how close they are. It's probably difficult to tell if a Vietnamese girl is a lesbian or not. Where do you draw the line?

The Vietnamese culture is very basic, the man is supposed to be caring, giving, a provider, a protector. Women are supposed to have the kids, take care of the family, and know her place in society. It's a very fine drawn line, at the same time it's just basic stuff. One book I read said for a foreigner to come to Vietnam he may think my god they're unstructured. The Vietnamese society is so structured and so well knitted it's hard to penetrate because it's under surface is not on top. You can't see it on top, but everybody knows their part in Vietnam, what to do and how to address each other. To go out of the boundary that's when you create havoc.

I taped a great video yesterday cause it was on PBS on the Vietnam War. They talked about a segment and how the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong saw the Americans through their eyes. It was great cause finally they had something like that and they were talking about some old Vietnamese woman who did her part in the war. Whether you hated them or liked them, whether they were communists or not I respect the Vietnamese women because they have played a vital part since the beginning of our history through now. When I saw the end of that segment I wanted to go back to Vietnam and

do a statue for the Vietnamese women. We owe so much to them. We are grateful to them.

The Vietnamese men never forget that. When they address, when President Ho Chi Minh or other leaders talk, they always include the women because they're so vital and essential to our cause, our revolution, our whole society. It is them that makes it work. They are the administrator of the house. That's when Vietnamese women when you talk to them they sound like they are giving you a lecture and they are preaching, but they're just telling you what they know. You better listen up because they're older. They've gone through a lot. Vietnamese girls that don't listen ultimately pay a price because they screw up some how. Or they wander off the different path. But like I told you Vietnamese people like that they're all separated. It eventually comes down to the waterfall and flows to the same river. Vietnamese don't wander off too long.

If we wander off it's probably due to outside influence or something personal in our life, but usually the family is intact and everything is pretty much okay. So you can imagine what I'm saying how tight our Vietnamese culture is and our society and our country.

For any foreigners to come in and do what they did like the French and the Americans coming in there burning the villages taking the villagers out of their homes in which

they had lived for generations because they think the Viet Cong are there it's stupid. Viet Cong, they are the communists, because during the war they thought that in order to stop the Viet Cong from having supplies of food and ammunition they would burn the villages which were supporting the communist cause so they would move the whole provinces out and settle them in another place. You just can't do that! These provinces and villages were there from the beginning of time. The villagers don't know any other part of Vietnam they just know that area, but the Americans didn't understand that. That caused resentment among the villagers even more so, even if they weren't even communist affiliated or supportive--they are now. This is the way to get back at the Americans.

America's biggest mistake was going in there and not even studying the people at all. Now they're beginning to find out, a lot of veterans would tell you they didn't even begin to know the language, the culture, the people--nothing. I don't blame them [the veterans] because they were in there for a year. Americans did something very stupid. Considering about the communists is that they sent the boys over there to do a year's tour, after that year is up the American veterans, soldiers pretty much know what's going on he should stay there until the war is over. But they take him home and replace them with another guy whose

just fresh out of the water. So it's a vicious cycle again. See the Vietnamese soldiers don't do that, they fight on so they know, they're experienced, they know the territory. The Americans after one year, they're counting their days, they're going home and stuff. Some eighteen year old guy comes by and he's next, he's got another year to learn. By the time he learns it he's gone off to America again or dead.

Vo Nguyen Giap is one of the greatest generals probably in modern history, if not history. He defeated the French in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu. As a matter of fact the battle is still being studied by military science around the world now of how genius that battle was by the Vietnamese surrounding the French. He says that Vietnamese military science has one motive, one motive only and that is to win. That is to win at any cost and when you say that. That means you can imagine what that person goes through. When you say you have to win that means anyway, but that's the reason why I'm very proud of the Vietnamese.

It's like my dad says, "Son, whether you favor the communists or not and whether you like them or not you have to respect them." I say, "Dad, I respected them a long time ago. Even when I was a little kid and I didn't know what communists were about and people would cut down Vietnamese communists." I never really joined them or did anything, I

wasn't confused. I just wasn't sure--should I keep on favoring these people too? Because I thought they're my own kind. See I have this thing that they are Vietnamese whether they are communist or not, they were still my own people.

I hated the Vietnam War because it was us fighting our own people. All we did was help the Americans kill our own people. That's basically how I saw things. Now I'm getting real personal, the Americans who came over there did not know what the hell they were doing. They'll admit it. They went over there and said they can't tell the good guys from the bad guys. Well that's true, they didn't know. They were very naive kids. I just saw so much destruction and waste, what they did to our country for ten years. It would have been easier if they just gave us money and let us fight our own people. But no they just came there and uprooted our culture, tried to westernize our people and things went wrong.

When I saw that, my brother and I we vowed never to have that happen again. If I can do anything I'm going back to Vietnam, never have anybody come to our country to do what they did. No more of that crap. It's just gone on too much. The Vietnamese we have suffered so much, so many times, so long, that it's time we got a break. I appreciate America trying to give us aid eventually to help our country

to rebuild, but that's all I want is aid. I don't want any Americans there. I don't want them to think this is Japan where they act like we owe them something. We don't owe America anything. Japan, the reason why they let American business over there is because they feel obligated because Japan is having business in America. It's easy, I'll scratch your back, you scratch mine.

But the one communist leader, Bui Diem, a good man he came over to France a couple of months ago. He talked on the BBC and addressed the Vietnamese around the world. He says that Vietnam is in a very bad situation, but we are getting better. He blamed the American government, especially those guys who were with the Vietnam administration during the sixties for preventing America and its government of today to open Vietnam, because they want us to beg. The man said something very good. He said that Vietnamese people, we are not very strong right now, we are very weak, but we are surviving. We are not on our knees. We are still on our two feet and you Americans, especially the ones who were in the administration during the sixties tried to cripple us and tried to make us beg. It's you who are preventing us from getting aid from around the world, because it is Bush who is holding the monetary bank together.

He is not allowing world trade over in Vietnam because so called POW's [prisoners of war] were still being kept. We've done everything that America wants. We've withdrawn from Cambodia, we let all the POW's out, we're reforming. Still they won't do it because they're still holding that dam ticket over us--you guys are holding POW's. How do you even know? We let Americans go back to Vietnam eventually and they came in search of all the POW's. They couldn't find anybody and they're still using it and assuming we're still holding all the POW's. Vietnam is a very proud nation. We would rather suffer and be alienated from the rest of the world, rather than be humiliated and go through the same old predicament that we did during these last centuries.

Going back to the comparing/contrasting, there are a lot of things that eventually you start to realize comparing Vietnamese and Chinese. You know the differences and I wanted to tell you. You will know it soon, it's just, hell my brother would say it's just plain physical luck. The video we saw last night, oh god, there were some Vietnamese people, they were beautiful. I want you to watch how the Vietnamese thought of the American president in Vietnam. It was an hour long how they felt, how they came in there and how they destroyed Vietnamese culture by preventing North Vietnam and South Vietnam from being reunited. It was

America who told Ngo Dinh Diem in 1954 not to have the election in 1956 to unite Vietnam, because North Vietnam was communist and it wasn't good for you.

It was why America was there later on. America caused the whole problem. They won't tell you that. They were there from the beginning, the CIA and Eisenhower, Kennedy to Johnson to Nixon to Ford. They were all there. They knew what was happening, but they didn't want Vietnam to unite because it was communist. It's the domino theory that Eisenhower talked about--if South Vietnam fell then all of Southeast Asia would fall. Nixon is saying we should have helped Vietnam, because then Vietnam could have stopped China, because they are the real enemy, Chinese communism, not Vietnam. Now it's a little bit too late Nixon.

Anyways, they had some real Vietnamese-looking people, it was great. They were beautiful. This one lady she was a nationalist and she was being tortured by the South Vietnamese army and the Americans. They were saying they put some electric shock on her nipples and they said to her, "Do you confess?" She said she couldn't because she loved her country. Whenever she was about to confess she saw the blood and bones of her people in front of her eyes and she would never confess. So the lady was a nationalist. I would love to talk to her.

That kind of lady, she's the kind of lady, I was telling you about--Vietnamese women. They would get up on a horse, get a sword out, and crush the enemy--that's the kind of thing I'm talking about. The famous war about the Trung sisters, Hai Ba Trung, one of their famous generals was a female who was pregnant, gave birth. After she gave birth she fought her way out with two swords carrying her baby on her back to safety. That's a well known story in Vietnam. If you look at the tombs and graves of the Vietnamese women who fought the Chinese, there were a lot of Vietnamese ladies down the list.

So, it shows you apparently how society was different then. Women had power. I'm saying to some degree they still do, but back then they had even more power. Chinese never did--big difference, very big, in fact a big difference anywhere in the world. You can put that down. This isn't just comparing and contrasting with Chinese, this is more like comparing to anybody. You name me any society in ancient or modern times where women have so much power as that; where she could gather forces to fight the alien enemy. I'll tell you why--because it was a given right. It was a given right. Even in the good old Le dynasty, written documentation--I told you where the husband died, the wealth of the father goes not to the son, but goes to the wife, that's unique. No one has done that even now.

There's a lot of things the Vietnamese culture has to offer. We are rich in the sense that we have so much human down-to-earth attributes and traits and that we're a very complex people. At the same time, we're very easy. I told you again, the Vietnamese society and culture and people are contradictory. We're simple on one hand, as far as being a peasant, a farmer--we really don't expect much from life, except good health and good family. We're complex in the sense that you don't know what we're thinking. We could be thinking we're going to kill you right now and I want to do this and that and you don't even know. So very contradictory.

A Vietnamese woman could be the most sweetest woman in the world, the gentlest woman, loving mother and sister, a great wife. At the same time she could be the biggest bitch--the dragon lady. She can take the rein by the hand--okay my husband is dead I'm going to have to rule this family with an iron fist. That's what I'm saying she can reverse her roles so good.

A Vietnamese farmer, he can be the simplest man in the world, just tending to his rice paddies. Well, if a foreigner comes around, he's the fiercest fighter on earth. He doesn't know anything about war tactics or guerilla warfare, but he will learn, because he has to win. It comes down to that thing, that we have to win. If I don't win

they're going to be in my country and they're going to tell me to do things I don't like.

No human being, especially the Vietnamese, like to be told what to do. Ho Chi Minh, the reason he rallied the North Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese on his side during the war against America was the famous motto--he said that nothing is more precious than independence and freedom. That was more precious than anything else, not wealth, not jewels, not money--it was independence and freedom.

To the Vietnamese that was the most precious thing, because we didn't have those, not too much in our history, not since the Chinese came about 2,000 years ago. Freedom has been kind of elusive to us. People are always trying to do something to us. I don't know why they want Vietnam. That's a question I've been trying to ask myself for a long time. Pham Van Dong, he's also Vietnamese, he says it's a known fact that we've always struggled in the past and it will be so in the future. That's what scares me.

Any Vietnamese, like my brother said, who thinks that after the war everything is going to be okay, is not Vietnamese. He's not being realistic, because, you know, a real Vietnamese knows he's going to have to struggle. I can be talking to you today and years from now I could be leading a trip in the jungle fighting some foreign aggression.

That's the fact of being Vietnamese, nothing is safe. There's nothing secure about being Vietnamese. At the same time Vietnamese people are the most happy-go-lucky people. If you had seen the video last night, these guys are fighting again and they're still smiling. You know what they were smiling for? Because they knew they had the compatriots together. They knew they had this worthwhile cause--I could die, but I'm going to smile, I'm going to have a good spirit on my mind and heart. That's the main thing that counts and that's one thing people can't do.

My mom and dad have taught me that whether you're down and out on your luck, you should always prevail. You should always be resilient. That's one of the traits of the Vietnamese--resiliency. We have always fought back. We bounced back so many times. Oh man, I thought the Vietnamese people, even amazingly enough to do what we did to the Chinese, is overwhelming for us. Time and time again after so many defeated rallies, you would think the Vietnamese would give up, but we never gave up.

Our heroes, one was down like my father said, "When the father dies the son rises up and he takes his place and his son takes his place and so on," until that goal is achieved. It took us one thousand years, but we did it eventually. That shows an undying spirit, no culture, no country has ever shown that--one thousand years of rule.

Another country would be forget it, they would be washed away from the pages of history. Their identity would be stricken and taken away, whatever is left, maybe a miracle.

We still retain our own ethnicity and culture, yah, we got some Chinese culture and borrowing, that was forced upon us--it's like being raped. You know what the word rape means? It's not a man sexually harassing a woman against her will, it means taking things by force, that's rape. That's the big definition of rape, taking things by force. That's what the Chinese did to us. That's what the French did to us. That's what anybody ever did, trying to come into our country.

In the war against America, a lot of Third World countries felt the same crimes being done to them and rallied behind North Vietnam. During the fighting against the French a lot of countries in Africa, who were ruled by England and France, were happy as hell that the Vietnamese beat the French. You see what I mean--America thinks they're the big policemen of the world. These are the big boys. They don't care for the little man, the little man meaning people in Africa and Asia. The blacks in America are a great example of exploitation. They were dragged out of their homes. They're not blacks anymore, it's a sad thing. You are right to a certain point. Like the same blood that of my Vietnamese ancestors thousands of years ago

runs through me. You still carry the same traits of that imperialistic, colonialistic attitude. You might well say Asians and blacks are equal in our eyes, but when it comes down to whether the culture is identifiable or who's more powerful or superior, you are going to be a little more biased. You're going to start bringing that white supremacy out. That's what's really sad. There's this dichotomy for whites that they think they are doing a good thing going around the world and helping people out, doing this Peace Corps bit.

I hate anybody who goes into anybody's country to tell you the truth, because I'm Vietnamese. I know how it feels when people come into my country and do what they do. I respect any nation in the world that would fight any foreign aggression out of their country, anybody, whether they're white, black, or Oriental. Anybody that goes into any country had no right to do what they do. I'll stand by that point to the day I die.

I don't think anybody should go into a country and impose their culture, their laws, their rules, their customs and attitudes on anybody. And no one in the world who has a right, who has a very proud culture will accept anybody without putting up a fight, no way.

If you're black or white, Hispanic or Asian, living in this country is not as great as you think it is. You ask

the black man, one out of four guys are in some kind of court system. They join the military as a way to escape things, but it is a crisis like the Persian Gulf that they're being used more than any other ethnic group, because they make up the majority. So that's why the blacks are there. You ask them why would they want to stay there. It's because that's all they know. It's a sad thing. They can't go back to Africa. They don't know one damn thing about Africa and that's a sad thing. You ask the Hispanics and it's the same thing. Well, I don't speak Spanish anymore, I can't go back to Latin America or South America. This country has a way of changing people, makes you forget your identity and accept things that aren't real like materialism and wealth. I'll take you down to a lower scale--fraternities--well, okay, Jack, you want to be in the Alpha Phi Delta, or whatever it's called--you better dress a certain way you. You better qualify certain things in order to match our group. Well, your hair's too long, you better cut it. No one in this group has long hair. Traditionally our fraternity only allows guys with brown eyes, you got blue eyes. You know stuff like that.

That's the lower scale I'm talking about, you don't even like that, that's stupid, right? Can you imagine your own culture--I don't like your hair, your eyes, your lips--I don't like anything about your body or anything that you

possess or believe, your values, what have you. That's the whole person's identity, that's all in your makeup. You know we're all substance, but we must have form. I believe form is our ethnicity, our culture.

If you don't have ethnicity and culture, you have no form, you're all substance. This body doesn't mean anything unless something precious or valuable is inside to make this body to work and to function. This frame is just to hold something. It's the brain that makes the body work. The brain remembers culture, it remembers identity, group relations with other people, our own perceptions, our own codes, our own behavioral cues that we have, that our people and our culture have taught us and conditioned us throughout the years.

I told a friend of mine awhile back that Vietnamese culture says you're proud and you've got to take the good with the bad and the indifference. If you say you are proud, that word is very, very strong. You better take all that bad that is dished upon that culture if you say you are proud. You can't say you're proud of this and that and do certain things--see, no I'm not Vietnamese because they do that! A lot of people do that and even the few people that do that, that's Vietnamese still. You have to accept that. You can defend it and you might like it. You can justify it if you want to, but you have to accept that. That's them,

they're Vietnamese aren't they? They're doing things that they think are alright and okay.

There are a lot of examples of things that Vietnamese do that I don't like, but I have to accept it because I have to identify with it. I know why they're doing it. Maybe sometimes I don't know why, but I have to accept it anyways. It's kind of like a salad where you pick things--well I want this and throw other things away, well no.

The beauty of culture is that is if it is rich and you love it, you think it's great. The bad thing about culture is if there's something you don't like about it, you can't do anything about it because it is a part of that culture already.

In Vietnam we start from the bottom. There is nothing luxurious, just the basic stuff and we still love it and you wonder why. I think it's strange how many people love Vietnam and we have nothing over there. It's because we love our country because it has so much. If you take that "so much" out of the word, what do they have left? The same thing as Vietnam, maybe worse because they have no culture to begin with.

I remember something Flo Evans of "Good Times," [situation comedy on television] said. I love using this because I remember her cousin and his wife were very rich and she was always borrowing money from them. Well it turns

out her cousin and his wife eventually were unemployed and he's been lying to his wife all the time and has been going to the movies instead of going to the job place. She asked him for money and he said, "We can't Florida, I can't, we have no money this time." They were hit hard, harder than the Evans because the Evans have always been down. See they have been up on the high ladder and when they fall, it falls hard. With the Evans' fall it's not such a long fall. Well the same thing with America. If you take all this wealth and materialism out, oh boy they get hurt right in the heart.

In Vietnam you can take anything you want from us because we had nothing to begin with except our love and our culture--the basic stuff. That's why I never try to attach myself, to anything materialistic because I know myself. One day I'll be back in Vietnam. I could have nothing--no clothes on my back, maybe just a tank top and shorts and I enjoy that and I might be happy though. That's what I'm saying. You have to understand your priorities and your basic needs--what do you want in this world. You can travel in this world and have a nice car and clothes and a great job and if that makes you happy then go for it, but don't forget what are you going to have left when you are old and retiring? When people don't care what you dress like and drive old man?

But in Vietnam or in other parts of the world people respect the elderly and don't care for the car or for the diamond. He's always respected because he has nothing to begin with except his experience and his wisdom. He's going to carry that through his old age, in fact he's going to be revered even more.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Analysis

Ethnicity is an adaptive mechanism utilized for survival. Adaptation is a process, not an isolated event. Adaptation is the relationship of the individual to society. Remenick (1983) duly notes, "in regard, especially when considering ethnic identity, we must also remember that vestiges of old identities do remain within the personality structure of the individual" (p. 21). Especially for Lac ethnic identity

. . . has a predominantly past time orientation. It is "embedded in the cultural heritage . . . of the group" (DeVos & Romanucci-Ross, p. 364). That aspect on one's ethnic culture including the history, customs, cuisine, and art forms; those things that a particular individual embraces, takes over as part of one's self, and uses to further that ethnic heritage." (Remenick, 1983, p. 20)

Lac has a fascination and preoccupation with the history of Vietnam as seen in the life history interview.

Vietnamese refugees have access to cultural traditions, such as maintenance of a national identity and filial piety, that facilitate the collective adaptation to the new environment. Moreover, "differences in individual characteristics as well as differences in the intensities with which native cultural values are held will affect

response to immersion in a new culture" (Haines, 1989, p. 79). DeVos (1976) states that "ethnic identity is a crucial differentiator determining the modes of social adaptation" (p. 4).

The "marginal man" concept, introduced in 1928 by Robert Park, is still a valid conceptual framework in terms of the adaptation process for first-wave refugees who came to the United States as children. Park (1928) speaks of

. . . a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples, never quite willing to break . . . with his past traditions, and not quite accepted . . . in the new society in which he sought to find a new place. He was on the margin of two cultures and two societies which never completely interpenetrated and fused. (p. 892)

Everett Stonequist (1932) expanded upon the "marginal man" and notes that marginal personalities occur wherever there are cultural transitions. A "marginal person" stands on the edge of two cultures. For members of the first-wave refugees who arrived as children in America, they experience conflict between their Vietnamese and American identities (Mindel, Habenstein, & Wright, 1988). The Vietnamese "refugee experience" typifies this situation. As Vietnamese refugees begin to interact with the host society their ethnic identity is challenged as part of the transition into the host society. Green (1947) notes that " . . . culture conflict and differential assimilation are basic factors in

creating the marginal man" (p. 167). The Vietnamese refugee is a "marginal man" in transition from the country of origin into the new American society. Refugees bring with them their traditional culture which conflicts with the host society's culture, creating a sense of ambiguity: "ethnic identity is in essence a past-oriented form of identity embedded in the cultural heritage of the individual or group" (DeVos & Romanucci-Ross, 1975, p. 363). In essence, refugees find themselves bordering on the margin of Vietnamese culture and American culture, but not a member of either as the adaptation process begins. For example, in the life history interview Lac states that

I've assimilated to this culture very well, there's no problem with that. I understand Americans probably a lot better than Americans do. In that aspect I enjoy American culture to a certain extent. I'm also very resentful of American culture to a certain extent. I enjoy some music they have . . . I enjoy some aspects of it, but other aspects I hate. Like how Americans are not family oriented, how they're not devoted to husband and wife. (pp. 82-83)

For Lac, marginality can be expressed as "away from the mainstream"--"in, but not of America." In particular, Lac has created a self-imposed marginality. Lac views himself as a victim of discrimination:

In a sense I rocked the boat, because I came over and told my story of my people. The Americans, the white people were impressed. Other Asian kids I would say deep down inside were envious--kind of like well we got nothing, we were born here, why are you coming and rocking the boat. It's bad enough being Asians among whites, now you come over here and you're saying you're a refugee. (Life History Interview, p. 73)

However, no specific incidences are revealed in the life history documenting incidences of discrimination:

. . . I guess I'm really lucky because I hear other stories about Vietnamese. We got along real well. Eventually my sister had a lot of friends and they accepted me. I felt real good at that point. I grew up in a lucky neighborhood because the kids were not that prejudiced. We played football and everything together. They accepted me as their equal. (Life History Interview, pp. 71-72)

Marginality, then, is a function of Lac's belief system--a cognitive reaction to his environment, not a function of behavioral conditions. This belief system is manifested in Lac's formation of an ethnic identity. Remenick (1983) notes that

when we speak of a person's identity we are referring to aspects of the world that one has taken over as their own both consciously and unconsciously; the energy and commitment to persons and groups, ideas and ideals; perseverance toward reaching goals that results in building one's personality . . . And, of course, these aspects of the world are not taken over or adopted in their original wholeness or entirety, but rather, an individual, usually unconsciously selects aspects of a component that are meaningful, aspects of someone or something that can become integrated with the rest of the existing personality. And, to be realistic, we must also recognize that individuals internalize many things that do not integrate well with other aspects of their personality, and this results in . . . personality or identity conflicts. These identities are built up over time through childhood maturation processes . . . (p. 18)

As a result, Lac adapted his belief system to appropriately suit his behavior, situation, and position as a young adult in his social environment. Lac states that

If you were really Vietnamese you would probably do like my brother because they have this commitment

almost, this code that you go by. I go by that code too. And it's a hard line to walk because you're trying to please your own kind, but you don't want to hurt the other people who are not your kind. I don't know if there's ever going to be a resolve or a compromise. (Life History Interview, p. 86)

Situations, such as these described by Lac, involve cognitive processes. Cognitive processes are a part of the equation culminating in specific values and behaviors esteemed by the individual.

More recently, Haines' (1989) book, Refugees as Immigrants, hypothesizes that Vietnamese refugees can be characterized by one of three patterns. These patterns are

[a] response to the necessity for coping with a new cultural environment: an "Old-Line Pattern," characterized by a deeply rooted loyalty to traditional beliefs and a "Defensively Conservative" reaction to factors in American life threatening their own values, an "Assimilation Pattern," characterized by an eagerness to integrate into American life and precipitous rejection of the old culture, and "Bicultural Pattern" in which attempts to preserve traditional values and practices needed in a successful life in a new society. (Haines, 1989, p. 79)

Lac typifies the last pattern, the "Bicultural Pattern." Lac has a fierce desire to retain numerous aspects of Vietnamese culture, while refusing to admit to the values of American culture; it is a selective rejection of old values and acceptance of new values (Haines, 1989). Lac maintains that, "I see America as a cow, I want to suck everything out

of that cow. Then I can go back and nourish back my country" (Life History Interview, p. 64). Haines (1989)

suggests that the dilemma that refugees face is

that when such a level of adaptation is achieved, they or their descendants will no longer be Vietnamese. They will have lost all but superficial manifestations of their ethnic identity and their rich cultural heritage. (p. 80)

Lac in his life history affirms this dilemma by stating that

Well sometimes I'll do things certain ways that I know is not, that is totally un-Vietnamese. If it's American then it is un-Vietnamese. It could be German. I don't know. But it's not Vietnamese. And sometimes I could really kick myself for that. It's like I'm letting my own people down and I shouldn't be doing that. I have this thing that I should be walking around and should be upholding my cultural foundation. That's why I feel angry sometimes because I should be doing more Vietnamese things in the sense that I should be speaking more Vietnamese not only at home, but to any Vietnamese. Whether they speak English or not I should be speaking Vietnamese to them. I should know more Vietnamese culture, not just history, not just certain customs, but pretty much every aspect of it. I feel myself being lazy and that's stupid. (pp.83-84)

This suggests a powerful dilemma faced by Lac, a first-wave Vietnamese refugee. As Bonacich and Modell (1980) have explained

ethnicity is a communalistic form of social affiliation, depending first, upon an assumption of a special bond among people of like origins, and second, upon the observe, a disdain for people of dissimilar origins. (p. 1)

Lac, through experimentation and pragmatism, will continue to form ideas about his new world and will continue to develop ways in which to survive in the host environment.

Conclusion

The life history of Lac Van Nguyen demonstrates numerous fundamental themes: world view; binary oppositions; ethnic identity; ethnic and social stratification; survival; and the issue of nostalgia. Moreover, the Vietnam War drastically affected and influenced Lac's parent's world view. Consequently these views were absorbed by Lac, manifested into fundamental themes that abound in his life history and make Lac the complex young man he is today.

Lac extensively talks about Lac Long Quan and Au Co, the founders of Vietnam; his emphasis is upon the origins of Vietnam. The Vietnamese identity becomes enacted in dramatized myth. From the viewpoint of Lac the myth is considered the absolute truth; he considers the dragon and the fairy princess his mother and father. Since ethnicity is subjective or

self-perceived [by a] group of people who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by the others with whom they are in contact. Such traditions typically include "folk" . . . beliefs, language, a sense of historical continuity, and common ancestry or place of origin. The group's actual history often trails off into legend or mythology, which includes some concept of an unbroken biological-genetic generational continuity . . . (DeVos & Romanucci-Ross, 1975, p. 9)

Origin myths establish who one is. Ethnicity is explained by myth because it attempts an explanation of group origin; it provides a sense of continuity with the past. Such knowledge helps Lac resolve priorities of allegiance

confronted in the host environment. The creation myth of this particular ethnic group suggests how they view themselves and nonmembers. In particular, Lac speaks of how the Chinese are arrogant to have such a myth on the creation of the universe as opposed to the Vietnamese just having a myth on the birth of their country. The myth of Lac Long Quan and Au Co expresses the world view of the Vietnamese people--their concept of nature, of self, of society. These three elements are undeniably intertwined. The nature of Vietnamese society is reflected in the self is seen in the verbal account of Lac Long Quan and Au Co. Produced out of this creation myth are binary oppositions and ethnic identity used to combat ethnic and social stratification.

Binary oppositions abound in Lac's life history. It is important to realize that in the creation myth of Vietnam, a binary opposition is born. In the creation myth Lac Long Quan and Au Co get married, have children and then one day Lac Long Quan says that they wouldn't be happy living together because she was an angel and he was a dragon. This myth itself creates a binary opposition of good and evil, so evidently imbedded in the Vietnamese culture. Lac speaks of Vietnamese women in terms of purity and pollution. Lac emphatically states that

. . . the Vietnamese believe that the Vietnamese woman is like the lotus flower. This is because the lotus flower grows out of the mud and dirt. The mud and dirt symbolizes the world, how it's evil and corrupt. But

the Vietnamese woman within this world is still pure and beautiful, because the lotus is not stained by dirt. (Life History Interview, pp. 60-61)

Lac's ethnicity is used to combat ethnic and social stratification encountered in this country. The discussion of ethnicity and social stratification which follows reflects the conflict over allegiance to the ideals left behind in Vietnam and the confrontation with the sociocultural environment in the United States. Lac views America as a hierarchy based upon race. Lac recalls

When I first arrived in this one elementary school in third grade the kids thought I was either Chinese or Japanese or Korean. Because that's all they knew . . . People would call me a "gook" and a "boat person" . . . In a sense I rocked the boat, because I came over and told the story of my people . . . Other Asian kids I would say deep down inside were envious . . . From that point on I didn't get along with other Asian Americans. We don't have too many Asians friends. We have Vietnamese friends simply because we're Vietnamese. (Life History Interview, pp. 71-73)

Refugees are separated from larger society both by the initial language barrier and by their own ethnicity. This pattern of differential association, expressed by Lac, tends to form social barriers which further accentuates the differences between them and non-group members. It is evident that Lac uses his ethnic identity to combat the pressures of ethnic and social stratification.

Survival is a critical issue for Lac. Lac considers the Vietnamese doctrine--life--the religion of Vietnam. The bottom line for Lac is survival. He explicitly states that,

"It's a doggy-eat-dog world and it's apparent in Vietnam. It's survival of the fittest" (Life History Interview, p.56). Lac describes the Vietnamese as a very pragmatic people, who are flexible and that's the art of survival (Life History Interview, p. 56). Lac philosophizes that

there are many moments in my life when I am confronted with the question on how the Vietnamese community is going to survive in this ever-changing society and I always wonder about that. We have a little saying, "We raise our voices only to be shot down." It makes me very sad. There's always going to be a vicious cycle . . . We had to sacrifice a lot to get where we are. It's like my dad says, "If you were stupid in this life, you're going to die, so you better be smart and survive." (Life History Interview, p. 92)

As DeVos and Romanucci-Ross (1975) note, ". . . ethnicity in its deepest psychological level is a sense of survival. If one's group survives one is assured of survival" (p. 17). For instance, in the legend of Lac Long Quan and Au Co, "many of the historical occurrences that are ritualized or become legend tend to be symbolic victories of survival" (DeVos & Romanucci-Ross, 1975, p. 365). Commenting on this Tepper (1980) states that

No other country in the history of mankind has gone through as many wars as Vietnam. The endurance of the Vietnamese people and the resiliency of their culture have saved their country and nation from disappearance. They have shown their ability to adapt very easily to their new conditions. Inside Vietnam, they have known how to learn quickly from their more powerful invaders and used the new knowledge to liberate their country. Outside their country, overseas Vietnamese have shown again their ability not only to adapt but also to prosper within a very short time. (p. 30)

The years of domination have evolved a unique resiliency and spirit amongst the Vietnamese population. The larger historical event, the Vietnam War played a vital role in the conditioning of Lac's world view. As a result of the "survival of the fittest," Lac has developed an attitude that he will not settle for second best in himself or others.

The last fundamental theme in Lac's account is the issue of nostalgia. What's interesting about this is that I directly asked Lac about his desire to return to Vietnam, that if he thinks Vietnam will be a different reality from what he remembers. Lac's response was, "people say it won't be the same, and I say no kidding I know that and I'm willing to do anything I can. I was going to be a farmer in Vietnam. I'll still be a farmer in Vietnam. I don't care as long as I'm in my country" [personal communication, May 18, 1989]. Lac emphatically declares that

. . . I never try to attach myself to anything materialistic because I know myself. One day I'll be back in Vietnam. I could have nothing--no clothes on my back, maybe just a tank top and shorts and I enjoy that and I might be happy though. (Life History Interview, p. 122)

Lac has been conditioned by his father's beliefs:

The beliefs and ideas that I've been conveying are from my father. He wants things to be the same again. He wants his place in society, to be somebody again. (Life History Interview, p. 82)

Moreover, Lac declares that

. . . "I was ripped out of my mother's placenta and the umbilical cord was cut from me." That's [Vietnam] your mother country. It's not like we were Chinese or some immigrants where as we always left our country, that it was no big deal. But we never left that's the thing . . . I am very confident to go back there . . . Because I know my country is very special. (Life History Interview, pp. 64-65)

As Greeley (1969) notes

Family, land and common cultural heritage have always been terribly important to human beings, and suspicion of anyone who is strange or different seems also deeply rooted in the human experience. (p. 21)

There is a longing in Lac's heart to return to something, to Vietnam, that is no longer what it used to be. The Vietnam War changed all that.

Ethnicity in America

In recent years, there has been a decline in the melting pot theories of ethnic and racial assimilation. Instead, cultural pluralism has been gaining ground: " . . . ethnicity continues to act as an important determinant of behavior for a significant number of people . . ." (Mindel et al., 1988, p. 3). Importantly Mindel et al. (1988) note that, "the maintenance of ethnic identification and solidarity ultimately rests on the ability of the family to socialize its members into the ethnic culture . . ." (p. 8). Lac vociferously states that,

"the beliefs and ideas that I've been conveying are a lot from my father" (Life History Interview, p. 82). Moreover,

it bears repeating that the historical experience of an ethnic group, both with respect to when the group arrived on these shores and the conditions under which the members of the group were forced to live, is a vitally important factor in the explanation of the persistence of the ethnic family and the ethnic group. (Mindel et al., 1991, p. 9)

Every member of society is located within a set of specific social relations. These relations define the range of experiences various individuals are likely to have at any given time. The "refugee experience,"--the process of reestablishing an ethnic identity as an inherent part of the act of becoming a refugee and the process of adaptation from flight to resettlement which continues years after arrival, determines in large part the kinds of experiences to which an individual will have to adapt while at the same time contributing to the formation of an ethnic identity, but what about the future of these individuals? Ethnicity, rather than diminishing, as a global phenomenon persists as an exceptionally tenacious force motivating human behavior (Marger, 1991):

The spread of pluralistic ideas and movements among ethnic groups in societies in all areas of the world must be viewed in large part as an outgrowth of the nationalistic fervor that has swept both the developed and developing worlds since the end of World War II. (Marger, 1991, p. 354)

Therefore, for first-wave refugees such as Lac, ethnicity will persist. Moreover,

ethnic group membership is ordinarily ascribed. This means that one's ethnicity is a characteristic ascribed at birth and not subject to basic change . . . Those who attempt to shed their ethnic identity find that society will rarely permit this fully. Gordon (1964: 29) notes in this regard that in American society a person who attempts to relinquish his or her ethnic identity finds "that the institutional structure of the society and the set of built-in social and psychological categories with which most Americans are equipped to place him--to give him a 'name'--are loaded against him." Once the ethnic categories in a society are set, explains Gordon, placing people into them is almost automatic and is by no means entirely voluntary on the part of the person. (Marger, 1991, p. 15)

Of course there will be varying degrees of retention of ethnicity among first-wave refugees depending upon such factors as integration into schools, social groupings, the work environment, as well as the identification with the majority. Mindel et al. (1988) explain that, "many of the traditional values of the Vietnamese family are still held by the majority of those now in America" (p. 291).

Naturally, there will exist certain distinctive patterns of adaptation for succeeding generations of Vietnamese arriving and already in the United States. Patterns, such as "grow[ing] up without assigned roles or groups that anchor identity" (Kitano & Daniels, 1988, p. 193) may begin to develop. But for Lac, ethnic identity is essentially a pluralistic adaptation focusing on the retention of ethnic ways (Kitano & Daniels, 1988).

The life history interview and analysis developed in this thesis is intended to generate hypotheses and further analysis of the "refugee experience." Moreover, the research is intended to add to the literature surrounding refugee issues of adaptation and ethnicity and to indicate that the time has arrived for a discussion and investigation into the problem of sociocultural adaptation and formation of an ethnic identity for first-wave refugees who came to the United States as children.

APPENDIX
SAMPLE NARRATIVE

Oh yeah definitely they made me aware. Same old thing, like my best friend will always recall before, when I first arrived in this one elementary school in third grade the kids thought I was either Chinese or Japanese or Korean because that's all they knew and I told my best friend then, but he was going to be, and that's another story. He said to the kids, "No, he's Vietnamese," and they said, "What's Vietnamese?" He explained to them that "Do you guys remember the Vietnam War?" and they're all "No." That's because they're too young to remember anything because the war was over by that time anyways. That was one of the discrimination that encountered because people assumed I was that stereotype that I was either one of the already known Oriental that had arrived in America and so being Vietnamese was really being different because not only was I a refugee, not an immigrant, but also a country that America fought. So you had this stigma on you.

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