



ABSTRACT:

The aftermath of the Vietnam War forced many families to escape a communist nation, causing many to make heartbreaking sacrifices. I recorded an interview with my father, Tim Lam, in order to have a direct account of his experiences while in Vietnam as well as the journey of escaping Vietnam during the aftershock of the war. Considering my father has long viewed Vietnam as a place he is unable to return to as long as it remains communist, I was interested in what influenced his perspective and mentality. While telling me about the sacrifices and tragic conditions he endured to immigrate to the United States, I was able to understand the harsh conditions created when the communist government took over and propelled Vietnamese citizens to search for ways out. By writing this paper using a qualitative study approach based on an oral history told by my father, I will draw inferences and provide an analysis of the sacrifices made in the Vietnamese emigration during the late 1970s. Along with my father's recollections, I will also include different experiences and perspectives from other refugees in order to provide a broader historical context. The sacrifices and hardships many Vietnamese refugees faced greatly influenced their stance on the current nation of Vietnam and may even cause a sense of resentment toward their homeland.

Keywords: Vietnam War, communist, sacrifices, immigration, emigration, government

Sacrifices Made in the Vietnamese Emigration During the Late 1970s

During the mid to late 1970s, South Vietnam underwent drastic changes in its governmental system as North Vietnam eventually took over South Vietnam, causing the region to become one communist nation. Many Vietnamese citizens viewed the new government as a controlling, dictatorial power stripping away freedoms from the people. Due to the Vietnamese Communist Party's takeover, many sought to find a way out of the country so that they could live out a better future. The new Vietnamese government became the main reason for a majority of Vietnamese immigrants' desire to set a new path towards America. Moreover, the status of being a communist state often prevents Vietnamese people who have settled in America from revisiting Vietnam; the sacrifices that were made to escape a communist government has forced many Vietnamese refugees to still view Vietnam as a place where freedom is suppressed.

The sacrifices my father and his family endured shaped his perspective of Vietnam as what he understands to be an oppressive country. To explore the journey my family underwent in the hopes of escaping Vietnam, I interviewed my father and asked a series of questions focusing on this larger examination: What were the sacrifices you and your family had to make in order to pursue a better future outside of Vietnam?

Today, many historians have forgotten to emphasize post-war experiences following the Vietnam War, and have instead focused solely on the events during the devastating conflict. The struggles and experiences many faced after the Vietnam War is, in my estimation, understated in history books and newspaper articles. This essay will provide a direct account of Vietnamese refugees' experiences and perspectives during the post-war period of the Vietnam War. Vietnamese immigrants made major sacrifices in their escape from Communist Vietnam, often influencing their negative views of the country years after the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

Method

By adapting a structure of oral recollection to develop an oral history surrounding my father's experiences, I hope to gain insight into the significant events that established the foundation of my family history.

Oral history allows different peoples to gain a sense of understanding and knowledge that may help to accelerate different areas of research and collaboration. The topic of Vietnamese emigration includes the experiences of Vietnamese refugees, thus allowing other refugees of different ethnicities and cultures to connect and identify the similarities and differences in each of their journeys. Not only can inferences be drawn across contexts, but this oral history will emphasize the importance of each individual's story-- a significant aspect that many historical books fail to include.

The interviewee for this project is Tim Lam, my 59-year-old father who was born and raised in the small and impoverished city of Tam Ky. Located close to the border of North and South Vietnam, Tam Ky was a place where annual floods struck. Tons of homes were affected, forcing families to prepare and stock nonperishable foods every year before the flood season. Tim currently lives in Rosemead, California with his wife and two daughters, and has lived there ever since he purchased the home in 1988, nine years after immigrating to America in 1979. He has three brothers and six sisters for a total of nine siblings who were all born in Vietnam, but they all currently reside in different areas of Southern California. Before immigrating to the United States, Tim completed elementary school and one year of junior high in Da Nang, Vietnam. He did not complete any additional schooling in America.

Using the recorder application "Otter" on a smartphone, the participant was asked to be interviewed in person on a pre-scheduled date. A list of general questions was created before the interview to ensure the participant had room to speak freely and comfortably about his experiences and stories. The list of general questions acted as a starting point for conversation; however, they were not meant to be the only questions asked. Taking the participant's answers to the general questions asked into account, the interviewer decided which aspects of the participant's experience to focus on. The method of asking broader questions instead of more specific ones prevented the participant from feeling confined to only one answer. The interview took place in the participant's home, making sure he would feel comfortable.

These official methods, though, do not capture our relationship or the intimacy of our home. Let me also say: On October 11, 2020, before the interview was conducted, my father and I just finished watching an NBA

game of Los Angeles Lakers vs. Miami Heat, where his favorite team won. Feeling happy, he and I sat on the living room sofa and I asked his permission for the interview to be recorded. At 7:14 p.m. that night, I started to record and asked him a series of general questions, later leading up to more specific questions that were based on his previous responses. Throughout the interview, we heard loud fireworks in our neighborhood, and my mother sometimes interrupted, causing distractions. I stopped the recording to take a five-minute break and began to resume the interview in a new recording. Near the end of the interview, I went back to fact check some of the information I learned. After concluding the interview, I thanked my father for participating and reviewed the transcript to make sure I hadn't forgotten any questions that needed asking.

Results

One aspect of Vietnam's Communist rule that directly impacted my father was the topic of education. When he was around fourteen to fifteen years old, he attended junior high in Da Nang, Vietnam, where he lived in dormitories that provided room and board at a low cost. When North Vietnam took over South Vietnam and the nation became communist in April 1975, the Vietnamese Communist Party closed the dormitories and structured their own educational system in which they did not provide food or shelter for students:

“Let me explain to you what happened. In 1975 the Communists took over and I didn't have to go to Da Nang anymore. I had to come back to my old town and go to regular junior high and high school. And by the time I go to tenth grade, the Communists, they make us go to school five days a week but three days they make us work. They use the students to work on the farm and build the dens. They use the students to go away from the school and work for the government. They don't pay nothing. You have to bring your own lunch. They say it is mandatory for the students to go work. You have no choice,” You don't work, they don't let you go to school. That's their way.

The Communist government in Vietnam took over the educational system, forcing students to work in farms as a mandatory regulation that granted two days of education a week. My father felt obligated to work, because he did not want to discover what would happen if he resisted and rebelled against the evident wrongdoings of the Communist government. To prevent any consequences or backlash towards his family, he sacrificed his free will during that time and worked in the farms without any complaints. He recognized the injustices that were prevalent in Vietnam and continued to do so as he kept working on the farm:

“I remember sometimes you sit with the group and Communists at that time from North Vietnam have the same classmates as us and they say 'wow you have good food, why don't you share with us'. And I don't feel good, even my own lunch they compare. They get jealous because a lot of poor people have a good take care and have good food and that's why people get jealous. That's why I hate communists. And then after I get back I say 'daddy, mom, I need to go and get out. Even you student have to stress like that. Even they don't treat you, the student, kid good. The student work for free and they treat like slaves. They can do that. And you look at the whole system, it's not right. That's the reason why I want to get out.



Realizing the many inequalities and injustices evident in the government's rule, my father told his parents that he could not bear being in the country any longer and that he needed to leave. Students were treated as workers and slaves, working without any compensation or food. Furthermore, students were very poor and used food as a way of classifying each other in terms of social class. My father despised this because he knew everyone was poor and there was no need to compare. He knew there was a better place than where he was in, where he could have a better future for his family and himself. Considering students needed to bring their own lunch and necessities in an already poor city, my father witnessed the extent of how people were suffering and divided. Due to his own realization, my father decided to hate communists--to hate the new state that Vietnam was in.

When my father's family decided to emigrate from Vietnam, they created a plan that would ensure the highest level of safety and security for everyone at that time. Although they created a plan that would allow all children and both parents to immigrate to America, unexpected events unraveled and affected my family deeply. My father explains the sacrifices his family made:

“At that time I think everybody wants to come to America, but we don't know what happen. We left the country is the dream comes true or not always stuck us, they catch us in jail or we don't know what happen, the boat can sink and we still have someone left in Vietnam. We divide two group. We have ten children, ten brothers, sisters, with mom and dad, in total twelve. My mom and daddy let seven children go in the first group first. And then mom and daddy have another three children in Vietnam and we left; seven brother and sister go to Hong Kong to the United States. I think around 1978 or 79 at that time. And then the second group stay there for five years,, I go with the seven group. Later, and then my mom passed away.”

Acknowledging their need to immigrate to America, my dad's family devised a plan to split up into groups of two while travelling to the United States to minimize the risk of casualties if something unexpected happened to one group. Being placed in the first group to leave their homeland, my dad left his mother believing he would see her again in America.



Since that was not the case, my dad added to his sense of resentment towards the Communist Party in Vietnam. As the memory of his mother remained, the pain of losing her persists today.

“If my mom came with me in the first group, she probably live longer. But when before I leave Vietnam, I think the boat delay a few days and the schedule change. And my seven group people say ‘Tim, you the youngest one. You have to take the train to go home and tell mom and daddy like the schedule change delay a couple day.’ When I come back I see my mom and my daddy. My mom said, ‘Tim, I’m gonna cook you one dinner good for you. I don’t know when I’m going to see you again.’ And she passed away. I didn’t see her. I was younger than you one age. She said, ‘Ah Tim, I’ll cook for you good. Eat a lot, okay? I don’t know when I’m going to see you.’ And I never see her again.”

My father's mother passed away while he was in Hong Kong. With hopes of reuniting one day with his mother, he was broken-hearted when he heard the news. He felt the same raw emotions that he said he felt back then during the interview. He will never forget the time when his mother passed away after she told him “I don't know when I'm going to see you.” My grandparents, aunts, uncles, and father risked their lives to move to a new country where they hoped to build a better future. In my father's estimation, the Vietnamese Communist Party forced them to have no other choice but to risk their safety, livelihood, family and money.

Discussion

My father emphasized how he and his family sacrificed their lives for the possibility of having a better future in the United States. In an attempt to further understand the experiences of my father and other Vietnamese immigrants (Espiritu, 2014; Hunt, 2010; MacLean, 2008), I will draw connections between social structures and how past tragedies have long-lasting impacts.

Government Regulations

After the Communists took over, “soul searching was the order of the day among those closely tied to the Saigon government.

They had lost all—position, honor, country—and many faced uncertain futures either as exiles or as inmates in Vietnam’s ‘reeducation centers’” (Hunt, 2010, p.186). Communist Vietnam was a dictatorial and controlling state, inducing a sense of fear of the unknown among all citizens. My father and his family were worried about what could have happened if they stayed in Vietnam. The Communist Party had the ability to force people into exile or “reeducation centers” if anyone disobeyed their policies or regulations. Therefore, my father strictly obeyed their policy of working in the farms three days a week during school hours in an effort to prevent any unnecessary trouble from the government. While working on the farms, he witnessed a pattern of poverty among Northern Vietnamese workers and Southern Vietnamese workers alike, specifically with the lack of food abundance. MacLean (2008) described Vietnam food shortages:

“Chronic shortages were not unique to Vietnam. Rather, they were the inevitable outcome of a centrally planned economy, as power within the system was based on the hoarding of materials that could be redistributed for other goods and services in the unspecified future.” (p.290)

The Vietnamese Communist Party did not focus on the food shortages of its state or create any social solutions to solve this major problem. Instead, they forced students to work in farms to serve as “slaves,” as my father stated.

The government’s lack of care for the Vietnamese people and the sacrifice of my father’s own independence and freedom in the farms have influenced my father’s work ethic, identity, and politics today. The harsh struggles my father faced with Vietnam in the past has molded him into a hardworking man who prides himself on his work. Today, I see him fixing everything around and inside the house, car, and yard. He helps my extended family with their repairs, too, considering he has developed a strong appreciation and love for the family he has. He does not want to rely on contractors, plumbers, mechanics, or yard workers because he wants to do things for himself. Since he had no government or authorities to help him or his family in Vietnam, he has been programmed to believe that a person can only rely on themselves and not others.

The Vietnam War was unquestionably among the “most brutal and destructive wars between Western imperial powers and the people of Asia, Africa, and Latin America;” however, post-war time events are often overlooked by historians and the public (Espiritu, 2014, p. 81).



Due to the communist state of Vietnam, many Vietnamese citizens wanted to escape the injustices committed by the government. Being one of the most tragic and destructive wars in history, historians often examine the war itself instead of its aftermath. For example, the lives of those who stayed in Vietnam after the war are not often examined by historians. Considering the personal stories of Vietnamese refugees who experienced struggles of “chronic shortages” amidst many other daily hardships are different from the “meta-narratives” in historical recollections, and “it is not surprising that little effort has been made to commemorate them in official memory” (MacLean 2008, p. 285). From my father’s recollection, half of his family escaped Vietnam, leaving the other half of his family still settled in Vietnam. When he left his mother in Vietnam, he had high hopes of reuniting with her in the future. However, he did not have that chance as illness came to her first. Since my father and his family went through an unexpected and tragic loss, he and his family members have a great sense of animosity toward going back to Vietnam. The sacrifices that were made during the time of post-war Vietnam are instilled in my father’s mind and prevent him from seeing Vietnam as a place of freedom.

Conclusion

Although Vietnam has improved the treatment of its citizens in recent years, negative post-war affiliations have still remained in the minds of those who have emigrated from Vietnam. Many immigrants who have escaped Communist Vietnam still view the nation to be filled with injustices and inequalities. The harsh experiences and sacrifices that the majority of Vietnamese refugees have made remain to shape and impact their lives today. To investigate this topic further, I may ask other family members of their experiences and sacrifices in immigrating to the United States in order to better understand the larger complexities involved with the Vietnamese Communist Party.

Based on different educational, environmental, or communal experiences in Southern Vietnam, other people may have different or similar perspectives of Vietnam during the late 1970s versus current day. Although my findings are mainly constructed from the perspective of my father, they may be used in and applied to future psychological studies of stress, anger or disenfranchisement in Vietnamese immigrants in the escape of Communist Vietnam during the late 1970s.



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