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POLI 105
Professor Cronin
4 December 2018

Remembering the Vietnam War and Becoming Vietnamese-Americans

This paper explores the ways in which Vietnamese-American immigrants come to view America and themselves in relation to their new home. I will discuss how they have formed identities and political alignments based on those views. I have four interviewees, two of which were interviewed together. The two interviewed together are my grandparents, a married couple in their 80s who moved to the US in 1992. My grandfather fought in the Vietnam War and was a prisoner of war for six years while my grandmother. The next interviewee is my mother, a woman in her 50s and is the daughter of the couple who moved to the US with them. The final interviewee is my cousin, a woman in her 20s who immigrated in 2008 when she was nine years old. All of these interviewees are first generation Vietnamese-Americans by which I mean people born in Vietnam who moved to the US and now consider themselves American.

Le Loan Kieu and Su Phi Hong in "Party Identification and the Immigrant Cohort Hypothesis: the Case of Vietnamese Americans" categorize the different groups of Vietnamese-Americans by the era in which they immigrated to the US and by the social circumstances that allowed them to do so. They hypothesize that many immigrants of the same country can be categorized into "waves" and they focus their study on Vietnamese-Americans. By their theory, my grandparents and my mother would fall into Wave 2 (1980-1994) both

because of the year they left their homes and because they were coming to the US to reunite with family members who came in Wave 1 (1975-1979). They found that Waves 1 and 2 are most often extremely conservative and identify with the Republican party because of the experiences they had living under the oppressive communist regime known as the Viet Cong and because there was a strong Republican presence in power at the time. My cousin aligns with the criteria set for Wave 3 (1995-2008) which describes people who moved to the US for economic reasons. My interviews led me to believe that the three who immigrated in 1992 are prone to aligning themselves with mostly liberal ideologies on matters concerning their own ethnic group while maintaining somewhat more conservative views due to an effort to assimilate to American society. My cousin, who came to the US at a much younger age, has been taught that others should consider her American from a much younger age coupled with the modern American political climate she grew up in produced an inclination towards social justice and activism.

I find that Le and Su's hypothesis supports my findings in my interviews. Their focus, however, was solely on party identification but my interest more in the attitudes Vietnamese American immigrants take on towards America after arriving. It seems to me that this dictates much of the behavior and dialogue we see among Vietnamese American communities and the formation of party identification is a symptom of these attitudes. Despite our slight difference in focus, much of theory explains to me the American political climate in the 1980s and 1990s that my interviewees could not convey to me and that I could not understand otherwise because I was not present at this time period. It is not simply an effort to assimilate that has caused my grandparents and my mother as Vietnamese-Americans of the second wave to conform to conservative ideologies but also an aversion to communism and all associated leftist politics that

stemmed from living under an oppressive regime whereas my cousin, like most of the third wave, arrived at a young age and has known America more than they have known Vietnam so they feel comfortable pointing out America's flaws and take more notice of racial prejudice having grown up as an ethnic minority unlike the first and second waves.

Much of the perception of America and Vietnam, for all three waves, was affected by experiences with both Vietnamese and American government. In my interviews, I found this to be true in my interviews where my grandfather had a tendency to bring up the Viet Cong saying, "the Americans didn't lie like the the Viet Cong did" when asked about his perception of Americans even when the question was not about Vietnam. His experiences were always placed in the context of the Viet Cong. By comparison, anything the Americans might have done will never compare to how the Viet Cong treated him. What he and my grandmother saw of the Americans was only when they were being interviewed by Humanitarian Operations to prepare for their immigration. My mother was greatly influenced by my grandfather whereas my grandmother tries to keep out of all things political in general. When asked straightforwardly about their perceptions of America and Americans, my mother was very aware of her answer and said that she had no feelings towards Americans. My grandmother said the same but she revealed she truly had little to no contact with Americans even to this day. I know this is not the case for my mother as she attended college in America and has been working since she first arrived. When I asked if she would like America, my mother said, "I don't know. I really didn't have any expectations. I was too busy being scared for my life to worry about that. I just knew that I couldn't stay there." However, she later said that, "I knew that if we had to flee, we'd need English. So I studied English in anticipation... The Viet Cong shut down English programs in

schools. They wanted to make us stupid. So my siblings and I studied at home on our own."

These English programs were created and run by the American embassy in Vietnam. In Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract*, while the effect is not so severe as to cause Vietnamese people to view their own country through the eyes of foreigners as was done in Kenya, the methods were the same in that the American government gained a presence in the Vietnamese education system and was able to influence young minds teaching them about the American Dream (Mills, 89).

She was told that, "there was no discrimination there like there was in other countries." She was hesitant to place Americans on a pedestal while she shamed the Viet Cong but she showed that these were the messages she received growing up. My cousin, who had no memories of the war and grew up during the digital era, drew her ideas about America from media, Disney Channel in particular. She thought that, "America glamorized teenage years. It glorified the value of American individualism. There were always characters that stand out in a certain way and don't fit into a clique. It was indicative of how Americans actually think about America even now."

She was able to see America from a more objective standpoint without the context of the trauma of war and oppressive governments coloring her view of America. She was too young at the time to comprehend the ways in which the modern Vietnamese government was oppressive.

According to *Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Little Saigon* by Nguyen Phuong Tran, there was also an anti-immigrant sentiment, an issue not specific to Americans in the 70s and 80s but at this time period this sentiment was directed towards incoming Vietnamese immigrants who were believed to be "dirty, different and do not belong here" (Nguyen, 100). My grandparents would not have experienced this treatment from Americans because when they arrived, they were unable to find work because the war took such a large physical toll on them so

they were unable to endure the joint and muscle pain that was required of unskilled labor. My mother and her six siblings, however, did come in contact with Americans regularly as they studied to earn an American diploma while they worked to support their families. My mother said, "Seattle was very progressive. It's very white but they were all very nice. There were some people every once in a while that talked down to me at my jobs but I was able to find a new job every time an incident like that came up" but when she tells me about the parents that did not let their children go near her when she worked in a daycare, it does not sound so easy to find a job as she says it is. She used to chastise me for criticizing the country I lived in. She warned me not to let others hear me say that because I would be told then that I did not deserve to be here. Upon sharing this experience with my cousin, she told me she heard exactly the same things. The case of the Vietnamese-American immigrant is also unique because of the American involvement in Vietnamese affairs. The Americans entered the Vietnam War with the intention of containing the spread of communism and said that they wanted to promote democracy as the superior form of government. As a result, American history books often paint America as the heroes of the war and that mentality spills over into their everyday life and how they interacted with and viewed Vietnamese-Americans. "In a racist society where individual acts could pull down an entire race and vice versa, present-day bad behavior by Vietnamese Americans naturalized the epic failures of the past... perhaps South Vietnamese ingratitude and ineptitude made the fall of Saigon a fait accompli. The refugee community found itself in the unenviable position of constantly justifying the sacrifice of fifty-eight thousand American lives" (Nguyen, 98). There was an idea that Vietnamese people should be grateful for American efforts to protect

them. My cousin finds that this created a mentality of "wanting to seem like the 'good' refugees" and aspiring to become the model minority instead of "social burdens."

It is common for Vietnamese-Americans to push away the pain they might have felt in their attempt to assimilate. Gloria Anzaldua's *La Frontera* spoke about the effect that her culture had on her as a woman and it gave me the courage to think about and discuss the ways in which I have seen Vietnamese culture, and perhaps military culture as well, has affected my interviewees knowing from her example that by criticizing aspects of her own culture did not mean she was turning her back on it. It gave me insight as to how these cultural aspects contributed to the lack of discussion about emotional suffering. Through these interviews, I have learned that my family is inextricably tied to the Vietnamese military and government as my grandfather was a teacher at a well-known military academy in Vietnam and was a sergeant major in the army while my great uncle on my grandmother's side was a lieutenant general. I am unaware of how high-ranking these titles may or may not be but my grandfather was very quick to inform me that he and his brother-in-law were indeed high-ranking officers. Politics and military life took up most of his life and as a man, that tradition of ignoring feelings is further reinforced. It is to be expected, then, that when asked about his experience of being a refugee my grandfather would solely focus on the factual political events of the war and would brush my questions of his personal thoughts and feelings under the rug. Because of this, my mother's and my grandmother's experiences of the war were vastly different from his and from each other. Anzaldua tells us that, "Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them. How many times have I heard mothers and mothers-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them, for being *hociconas*, for being *callejeras*, for

expecting their husbands to help with the rearing of children and the housework..." My grandmother broke her wrist during the war. It is still swollen to this day and not one of her grandchildren knew about it, myself included. She still performed what she believed were her duties as a mother and wife and now as a grandmother homemaking and, once my grandfather became a prisoner of war, a breadwinner too. She thought it was common sense that my mother and her sister would look after their five brothers but my mother remains resentful of that. She says, "Your grandfather assumes it was just your grandmother that took care of us all but he had no idea that I took care of everyone while my brothers went off to fool around with girls." This trend continues well into her 30s upon arriving in the US. My grandfather had no idea because she never told him. This was what was expected of her and complaining was not an option because that time could be spent earning money or studying. She is resentful of this treatment and yet still I see her enforcing this kind of mentality saying, "what kind of woman doesn't know how to cook." In an earlier paragraph, my cousin spoke about the glorification of American individualism. She paired this with the stark contrast of the Vietnamese culture of collectivism and how important it was not to stand out and complain too much. She spoke about the concept of "saving face" and how "we have to appear strong on the outside. It's very hard being forthcoming with your feelings. In our culture it's one of the things that's the least acceptable to be talked about." Many refugees like my mother and grandparents stay away from American politics because it could cause trouble and hinder their chance at a quiet and peaceful life. Third wave immigrants like my cousin, however, were "imprinted in an environment of thriving ethnic enclaves, enhanced political representation and coethnics elected, and an ability to access Democratic as well as Republican public officials" (Le and Su). She has lived most of her life as

an ethnic minority, unlike my mother and grandparents, and is more prone to identifying with other ethnic minorities who have also suffered injustices. She feels not only sympathy but empathy for people like Trayvon Martin and the incidents in Ferguson which inspires her inclination towards activism and social justice. She chooses to speak out about her pain because she feels that she can do something about it. This is her way of using her pain in a productive way.

I had a difficult time convincing my mother that she had no reason to be afraid of Americans finding out that she had already earned a Vietnamese diploma. She earned a scholarship in an American university because she said she had not finished college. American jobs did not accept Vietnamese diplomas issued after 1975. She feared deportation as her mind always returns to that. I believe that, although she is a naturalized American citizen, she is aware that there are a good number of people who would not consider her "truly American" and would gladly see her leave this country no matter how progressive she may say we are. Throughout my interviews with my grandparents and my mother, when asked outright they would say they are Vietnamese-American but in the middle of a sentence when they did not notice, they referred to themselves as Vietnamese. Even when asked about modern-day Vietnam which none of us had ever visited, they still referred to them as "our people." When I ask if what my cousin and I are, both my mother and grandparents said we were American and they made no mistakes keeping that in mind in their other answers. My mother and grandparents find strength to be pushing through their pain whereas my cousin defines it as speaking out against what is not right. They try to forget their pain and embrace America but still they consider themselves first and foremost

part of a Vietnam that has long been dead. My cousin makes it her mission never to forget her story and to make sure those around her never forget either.

Works Cited

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