

# OUR VIETNAMESE HEARTS

Traumatized Refugees to Thriving Immigrants:  
The Homeland is a Destination, But No Longer a Destiny.

*By Andrew Lam*

*Mẹ Việt Nam ơi, Chúng Con Vẫn Còn đây*  
(Oh Mother Vietnam, We Are Still Here)

The lyrics from this sentimental song come back to me once in a while, especially when I think of the Vietnamese Diaspora and its complicated relationship with its homeland. One bitter evening on April 30, 1976, in an auditorium in downtown San Francisco, my family and I sang it to mark our first anniversary in exile. The first of a handful of Vietnamese songs penned abroad after the end of a war that spurred an unprecedented exodus, *Oh Mother Vietnam* was sung the way a people who had just lost a country would sing it; that is, with tears in our eyes and a cry in our voices. Some in the audience, I remember, even wore white headbands, the kind worn at some funerals to mourn the dead.

Nearly four decades have passed since then. If I were to sing it now, not that I remember the lyrics entirely, I would sing it with a tone full of irony. So removed from that emotional juncture, I wonder to what extent is the song's declaration still true? Vietnam is accessible now to the Diaspora, but to what extent are we still *here* for her? Who, in fact, are we?

In his book *Tribes: How Race, Religion and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy*, Joel Kotkin describes a quintessentially cosmopolitan global tribe as an international community that combines a strong sense of a common origin with “two critical factors for success in the modern world: geographic dispersion and a belief in scientific progress.” Kotkin's primary examples include the British, Jews, Chinese, Japanese, and Indians. These groups, relying on mutual dependence and trust, created global networks that allow them “to function collectively beyond the confines of national or regional borders.” In subsequent writings, Kotkin has added Vietnamese to his list.

▷ *Tri Ta, the first Vietnamese American elected mayor of a U.S. city, in front of Vietnam War Memorial, Westminster, California, Nov. 9, 2012. Allen J. Schaben/Los Angeles Times*



## The Trip to Orange County

More than four million Vietnamese have fled or migrated abroad since the Fall of Saigon in 1975. They have re-established themselves elsewhere, scattered on five continents. These days you can find restaurants selling *pho*, *banh mi*, and other Vietnamese favorites in South Africa, Brazil, Dubai, and beyond. I myself have relatives living in six different countries on three continents. But the largest numbers of the Diaspora ended up in North America, and the largest portion of *that* population resettled in California, where my family and I, and most of my relatives, now live.

Ours is an epic filled with irony: traumatized by wars and bound by old ways of life where land and ancestors are worshipped, where babies' umbilical cords are traditionally buried in the earth as a way to bind them to the ancient land, we relocated to a country known for its fabulous fantasies, high-tech wizardry, and individualistic ambition.

Take, for example, this bus trip I am on. A comfortable bus going south, with the nostalgic music of Trinh Cong Son, sung by the smoky-voiced Khanh Ly, echoing from the overhead speaker. Son was the most famous Vietnamese composer during the Vietnam War, the master of love and antiwar songs, and Khanh Ly the most famous singer. The two old Vietnamese ladies next to me are bragging about their children and their grandchildren, and how well they're doing, and so on. Behind me, a couple of middle-aged men are humming along with this song of their youth. And up front two kids are playing handheld computer games while their mother talks endlessly on her cell to someone about her restaurant business.

Vietnamese voices rise and fall; I close my eyes and listen. I swear I could be in Hue heading south to Saigon or Dalat.

Except, I am not. I am on the other side of the Pacific, on my way from San José to Orange County, going down Interstate 5 in a Vietnamese-owned bus. It is owned by one of three competing Vietnamese companies, which speaks to the infrastructure of our ethnic community in America.

One of the two old ladies comments that she cannot get over the fact that her son and grandchildren live in a big house on a hill in Fremont, California. "To think my son back home wore shorts and played in the rice field, and all my kids studied by lamplight. Now, he's a big shot engineer. It's so different, our lives, all these machines," she says and looks out to the verdant knolls that blur past us. Then, instead of being relieved, she sighs and says in a voice full of nostalgia, "We've come so far from home."

When I think of the Vietnamese narrative in America, I think of my mother's ancestral altar. In her suburban home on the outskirts of San José with a pool shimmering in the backyard, my mother prays. Every morning she climbs a chair and piously lights a few joss sticks for the ancestral altar on top of the living room bookcase and mumbles her solemn prayers to the dead. Black and white photos of grandpa

and grandma and uncles stare out benevolently to the world of the living from the top shelf. On the shelves below, by contrast, stand my father's MBA diploma, my older siblings' engineering and business degrees, my own degree in biochemistry, our combined sports trophies, and, last but not least, the latest installments of my own unending quest for self-reinvention—plaques and obelisk crystals and framed certificates, my literary and journalism awards.

What mother's altar and the shelves tell is the story of the Vietnamese American conversion, one where Old World Fatalism meets New World Optimism, the American Dream. After all, praying to the dead is a cyclical, Confucian habit—one looks to the past for guidance, and one yearns toward that “common origin” to keep him connected to his community, his sense of continuity. Getting awards and trophies, on the other hand, is an American tendency, a proposition of ascendancy, where one looks toward the future and deems it optimistic and bright.

So Mother Vietnam, we have survived but we have irrevocably changed. To be Vietnamese American, one learns to lurk between these two opposite ideas, negotiating, that is, between night and day.

Under California's cerulean sky the newcomers undergo a marvelous transformation. In the Golden State where half a million Vietnamese resettled, dreams do have a penchant of coming true. The newcomer grows ambitious. He sees, for instance, his own restaurant in the “For Rent” sign on a dilapidated store in a run-down neighborhood. He sees his kids graduating from top colleges. He imagines his own home with a pool in the back five years down the line—things that were impossible back home.

Day and night, indeed. The traumas of the initial expulsion and the subsequent exodus—re-education camps under communist rules, thirst and starvation on the high seas, years languishing in refugee camps, the horror of Thai pirates and unforgiving storms—are over the years replaced by the jubilation of a new-found status and, for some, enormous wealth. A community that initially saw itself as living in exile, as survivors of some historical blight, has gradually changed its self-assessment. It began to see itself as an immigrant community, as a thriving Little Saigon, with all sorts of make-it-rich narratives.

*Sister, did you know the man who created the famous Sriracha chili sauce was a boat person? He arrived in America in January of 1980 and by February already started making his famous green-capped bottles of hot sauce. Now his company rolls out ten million bottles plus a year. It's the next Ketchup. He's a very rich man.*

*Aunty, do you know that the man who started Lee's sandwiches started out with just a food truck? He parked outside electronics assembly plants in San José selling sandwiches*

*to mostly Vietnamese workers, but he parlayed his business into a multi-million dollar chain. There are now Lee's sandwiches shops in California, Arizona, and Texas, not to mention China, Korea, and Vietnam itself. It's an international corporation.*

*Brother, have you heard about the assistant to the attorney general in the George W. Bush administration? He was a boat person and left Vietnam at age fifteen but graduated magna cum laude from Harvard Law School and was editor of Harvard Law Review. He was the chief architect of the USA Patriot Act. Can you believe it?*

Soon enough houses are bought, jobs are had, children are born, old folks are buried, businesses and malls are opened, community newspapers are printed, and economic and political organizations are formed. That is to say, ours is a community whose roots are burrowing, slowly but deeply, into the American loam.

The pangs of longing and loss are thus dulled by the necessities of living and by the glory of newfound status and wealth. And the refugee-turned-immigrant (a psychological transition) becomes a naturalized U.S. citizen (more or less a transition of convenience) and finds that the insistence of memories insists a little less as he zooms down the freeway toward a glorious chimerical cityscape to work each morning.

### **To be a *Viet Kieu***

We fled abroad and changed, and we in turn developed extraordinary influence back home. The rich, well-fed Vietnamese abroad sent gifts and letters home, kept impoverished relatives fed. They sent pictures of themselves. "See, Tree Hang and Hien? They're Helen and Henry now. Aren't they so tall? It's the American milk and peanut butter, you know. They make your bones large and strong. Henry has a PhD. And Brother, look..."

The relatives devoured the photographs with their eyes. Beyond those handsome, smiling young adults who pose with such ease next to their sports cars is, inevitably, that two-story house with its two-car garage, as if in mockery. During the Cold War, like sirens, such images were the final tug that lured some Vietnamese from their shantytown toward the open sea.

So much yearning for America changes the character of Vietnam itself. *Vuot bien*—to cross the border—became a household verb in Vietnam in the 80s. *Viet Kieu*—literally "overseas Vietnamese," people of Vietnamese origin now living abroad—became a powerful symbol in the 80s and 90s for all Vietnamese of their potential, the future. And it is universally understood that the *Viet Kieu*, with their wealth and influence, can change the fortune of their poor cousins.

Until a decade or so ago, Vietnam's narrative of herself was that she's four thousand years old. Her milk is dry, her hair gray, she suffers from astigmatism. She has

little to offer her numerous children. America, on the other hand, is young, rich, and optimistic: everything that Vietnam cannot be. Vietnamese, increasingly a younger population and full of yearning, inevitably dream of America, a place they imagine of peace, freedom, and wealth, and of little suffering.

For let it be noted that, despite the horror and bloodshed of the war, the Vietnamese missed the Americans after they abandoned the country. Stepping over broken wings of warplanes and moss-covered fragments of rusty old tanks, young Vietnamese search for America. The American relics offer wondrous possibilities. Assemble the broken parts and you might end up with a car, a bridge, or even a homemade factory. Dig up some missing bones and crown the assemblage with an MIA's dog tags and, who knows, you might turn it into a coveted treasure, an American GI's bones, to be sold to Americans for a lot of money.

A few years ago, I went back to Vietnam to participate in a PBS documentary, and I did the touristy thing: I went to the Cu Chi Tunnel in Tay Ninh Province, bordering Cambodia, the underground labyrinth where the Viet Cong hid during the war.

There were a handful of American vets in their sixties. They were back for the first time. They were very emotional. One wept and said that, during the war, "I spent a long time looking for this place and lost friends doing the same."

But the young tour guide told me that it was tourism that forced the Vietnamese to dig up the old hideouts. She, however, did not see the past. She crawled through the same tunnel with foreigners routinely but she emerged with different ideas. Her head is filled with the Golden Gate Bridge and cable cars and two-tiered freeways and Hollywood and Universal Studios. "I have many friends over there now," she said, her eyes dreamy, reflecting the collective desire of Vietnamese youth. "They invite me to come. I'm saving money for this amazing trip." If she could, she told me, she would go and study in America.

Here's a young woman who looks at a tunnel that was the headquarters of the Viet Cong and the target of massive bombings years ago and what does she see? The Magic Kingdom. The Cu Chi Tunnel leads some to the past surely, but for the young tour guide it may very well lead to the future.

After the Cold War ended, Vietnamese refugees were no longer welcome in the West, and, as forced repatriation became more or less a new international policy, boat people stopped coming. But the migration did not stop. In fact, it continues to this day, albeit in a more orderly fashion. Relatives sponsor relatives, Vietnamese marry Vietnamese Americans, political and religious prisoners and Vietnamese Amerasians come under the U.S. special programs, and, the latest wave, well-to-do and bright Vietnamese foreign students apply to study in the U.S., and children of the ruling class of Hanoi and Saigon (now called Ho Chi Minh City)—all are hopeful for a new beginning in America.

## A Bar on Truong Han Sieu Street

It sometimes seems almost inevitable in the twenty-first century that the refugee becomes an immigrant and the immigrant, if he fares well, becomes cosmopolitan, with multiple languages and cultural-geographical affiliations.

And it's inevitable, too, for many a Vietnamese abroad that at some point he takes the journey home.

Consider this National Public Radio story two years ago that began thus: "Many Vietnamese who fled the communist takeover have returned as visitors since, but none of them as commander of a U.S. guided missile destroyer, one making port in the same city where U.S. combat troops first came ashore in Vietnam in 1965. The symbolism wasn't lost on Commander H.B. Le of the USS Lassen as he spoke to reporters pier side."

Commander Le was five years old when he fled Vietnam in a crowded boat. Returning in his U.S. Navy uniform, he stood a foot taller than the old admirals who saluted him, a former boat person, someone they would have readily arrested three decades earlier if he were caught escaping.

Diep Vuong, a cum laude graduate of Harvard University with a degree in economics, left Vietnam as a boat person in 1979, but came back seven years ago to help fight human trafficking in An Giang, her home province in the Mekong Delta. "I always remember once we came to America my mother saying to my sisters and I that we were born Vietnamese for a reason, and it is up to us to figure out what that reason is," she said. Hers is that she can protect at-risk young women being sold into slavery.

As the rich-poor gap in Vietnam has widened with the growth of the economy, human trafficking has become a scourge. Vuong's programs are part of the Pacific Links Foundation's effort to empower young women by providing education, skills training, scholarships, and shelter to those at risk. "Increasingly, Vietnamese Americans are playing central roles in the philanthropy sector," she said. "As for me, I can't just sit and do nothing. Any of those girls being sold to Cambodia or China could be a cousin or a child of an old friend."

Nguyen Qui Duc, a Vietnamese refugee who became an American radio host and the author of the memoir *Where the Ashes Are: The Odyssey of a Vietnamese Family*, has found yet another incarnation in his late-fifties: as a bar owner and art curator in Hanoi. Why would he come back to the country from which he once fled as a refugee? "Home is where there's a sense of connection, of family, of community," he said after struggling to find a single answer. "And I found it here."

Duc is one of at least 200,000 *Viet Kieu* who return to Vietnam yearly, many only to visit relatives and for tourism, but a small portion increasingly to work, invest, and retire. The majority of the people who return are from the United States, where the largest Vietnamese population overseas resides. Indeed, thirty-eight years

after the Vietnam War ended, the Vietnamese Diaspora is now falling slowly but surely back into Vietnam's orbit.

Not long ago, a Vietnamese overseas had little more than nostalgic memories to keep cultural ties alive. During the Cold War, letters sent from the United States could take half a year to reach their recipients in Vietnam. Today, however, eighteen years after the United States re-established diplomatic ties with Vietnam, and six years after Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization, Hanoi is but a direct flight from Los Angeles, and Vietnamese at home and overseas chat online, text message one another, and video call on Skype. Vietnamese tourists visiting the United States is also increasingly the norm.

Overseas Vietnamese play an important role in Vietnam's economic life. According to Vietnam's Chamber of Commerce, in 2008, despite the slowdown in the world economy, Vietnam received overseas aid of more than \$7.4 billion. The Vietnamese government said that the Diaspora is reducing poverty and spurring economic development. Official development assistance pledged to Vietnam in 2008 by international donors was \$5 billion, whereas the overseas Vietnamese contributed \$2.4 billion more.

In 2010, the total amount of remittances plus investment funds from the Diaspora, according to Vietnamese government, had reached \$20 billion, or 8 percent of Vietnam's GDP. Hanoi, seeing the Diaspora as a tremendous resource, is even considering granting dual citizenship to *Viet Kieus* to spur further repatriation.

There's another form of *Viet Kieu* contribution that is not so tangible, but arguably just as important: themselves.

Nguyen Qui Duc's bar, Tadioto, an elegant place on Truong Han Sieu Street in Hanoi, has become a gathering place for artists and writers and intellectuals—expatriates and locals alike. Avant-garde art pieces hang on the wall or stand alone in the middle of rooms. "Public space is not yet what it should be in Vietnam," Duc explained. "I'm aiming to change that—to bring real dialogue between different people." Each week at Tadioto, Vietnamese-American poets and writers share their experiences with their Vietnamese counterparts.

Vietnam has reached an ideological dead end—but, in the private sphere, new political thoughts are being formed. If Vietnam still wears the hammer and sickle on her sleeve, her heart throbs now with commerce and capitalism.

There is, along with a fledgling civil society, a growing middle class, and a slow erosion of the political barricade as the pressure rises for political reform, transparency, and pluralism. The return of the Diaspora to the homeland is thus a double-edged sword: Many bring back financial investment and technological know-how. Yet with the presence of so many vocal *Viet Kieus* in Vietnam, a complex narrative is being formed, one in which knowledge and ideas of the outside world permeate the local culture and society. In this private sphere, and on the Internet, and despite continual arrest of dissident bloggers, the din of political debate and exchange can loudly be heard.



In the wake of that bitter civil war and the subsequent exodus is an irony: those persecuted by Uncle Ho's followers for being affiliated with the United States and as "collaborators" and forced to flee abroad during the Cold War are now being actively solicited to return to Vietnam to help invest in and rebuild the government that once spurned them. For having international connections in the post-Cold War aftermath is now seen as a good thing.

Having been victims of the war, these people with multiple affiliations have emerged as victors of the peace. They've managed to remake themselves and go on with their lives, and more important, by refusing to let rage and thirst for vengeance dominate their hearts, some have become active agents in changing the destiny of Vietnam itself.

### **Traditions and Ambitions**

The reason I am on this bus is this: to see for myself the Vietnam War Memorial in Orange County that I've heard so much about from my parents. My father, once a high-ranking South Vietnamese officer, was on the advisory committee of this memorial-building endeavor. On one evening a decade or so ago, the Vietnamese in Orange County raised more than \$200,000 for the memorial. Well-known Vietnamese singers sang for free and ticket receipts all went into the memorial fund. The result was two larger-than-life statues, one depicting a South Vietnamese, the other an American GI, standing side by side in combat fatigues adjacent to the city hall in Westminster, the heart of Orange County's Little Saigon.

Standing in front of it, I am of two minds. I feel something akin to patriotism for my long lost homeland stir in my blood as well as a deep sadness for the men who fought and died—and for those who survived but were broken by the experience; I feel, at the same time, a dire need for distance. While I stand there on a Saturday evening, a couple of older women light incense and pray and several older Vietnamese men in army uniforms stand guard nearby. Something somber and heavy in their stance suggests a collective sorrow that causes me to shudder; their eyes—eyes that no doubt saw the worst of the old war—convey anger, hatred, and bitterness. Their faces remind me of my father's.

It occurred to me then that while one strand of history still defines those men in army uniforms and, of course, my father, another strand of history was redefining me. My father considers himself an exile living in America, part of an increasingly small population; I see myself as an American journalist who happens to make many journeys to Vietnam without much emotional fanfare. For me, Vietnam, my country of birth, and its tumultuous history have become a point of departure, a concern, but no longer home.

The irony is that because he holds Vietnam so dear to his heart, my father cannot return to the country to which he owes allegiance, so long as the current regime remains in power. His is a rage left over from the Cold War that has no end in sight.

History, for my father and for those men who still wear their army uniforms at every communal event, has a tendency to run backward, to memories of the war, to a bitter and bloody struggle whose end spelled their defeat and exile. And it holds them static in a lonely nationalist stance. They live in America but their souls are still fighting an unfinished war in Vietnam.

The old passion lives on, but it must now contend with the new integration: the Vietnamese Diaspora, no longer in exile, is steadily finding itself in Vietnam's orbit. Lan Nguyen, writing for *Nguoi Viet*, the largest Vietnamese paper in Orange County, noted that "While the younger generation of Vietnamese Americans shares with elders a general concern regarding human rights, democracy, and freedom in Vietnam, they are not as invested in the cause." Nguyen, who lives in San José, cites language barriers and lack of experience under communism as the factors that help widen the generation gap. "The Vietnamese American youth...often are disillusioned as it seems their every effort to help Vietnam is met with criticism by those older than them. The elders in turn are horrified to see young people organize philanthropic missions to Vietnam."

The question remains whether the Vietnamese Diaspora can be an effective agent of change and find new ways to influence the future of the country. To do so, it needs to ask tough questions. Is there real freedom for those who give in to their hatred and are ruled by it? Is democracy for Vietnam possible when those who live in America often fail to understand and practice it with their own communities, and the majority of those in Vietnam barely show any interest? And what does it take to move beyond anger and lust for revenge, and create space for constructive discussion and dialogue and spur new political thoughts?

It is true: once the hate is gone, in its place is pain. Those who cling so strongly to hatred, I suspect, are often those who fear what comes after it. But it is true also that many of us have moved on beyond the old rancor, beyond that us-versus-them mentality. We have learned to absorb our pain and grief and are negotiating our positions between East and West, memories and modernity, traditions and individual ambitions, old loyalties and new alliances, such that we are in the process of recreating a whole notion of what it means to be Vietnamese, a definition that is both open-ended and inclusive.

So, Mother Vietnam, in a sense we are still here, but we aren't who we used to be. The new generations born abroad may still behold that sense of common origin, may still take pride in their heritage, but they are not bound by the idea that Vietnam is their destiny. Rather, it's one of their many destinations.

A new song is needed, one that describes an individual with multiple affiliations, with additional homelands, someone who shares a sense of common origin but is not bound by collective nationalism. The old umbilical cord, unearthed at last, is transmuted into a new trans-pacific verse, and is an epic in the making.