

The Southern Vietnamese, United States, Texas, and POW/MIA flags stand tall outside a shopping center on Bellaire Boulevard.

From the Ashes of the Cold War: Constructing a Southern Vietnamese Community and Identity in Houston

by Roy Vu

Quite often, immigrants are perceived as helpless, poor victims who came here with little or no financial resources and are constantly exploited. However, perception is often different from reality, and sometimes these earlier notions linger in the public memory. In contrast to this weighted perception, Vietnamese refugees and immigrants that have come to Houston have been active agents in constructing their community and *reconstructing* an identity that challenges and contradicts how Houstonians view the Vietnamese American presence in the city.

This has been no small task for an ethnic group in which some left their native land for fear of Communist retribution. Others fled to seek a better life for themselves and their families. Yet, the Southern Vietnamese identity¹ constructed during the Vietnam War era can be linked to the creation of the Vietnamese flag, commonly sighted along the Milam corridor near downtown Houston and along Bellaire Boulevard in Southwest Houston. It carries forth a legacy, albeit a troubled one, of these immigrants' former nation to pass on to future generations.

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Vietnamese Americans have significantly contributed to Houston's multicultural history. Since 1975, Vietnamese enclaves within Harris and Fort Bend counties have grown, creating a strong, viable ethnic group that has changed the residential and business districts in the greater Houston area. The Vietnamese American community in Houston is the third largest in the U.S. with a population over 58,000 in the greater metropolitan area. In development of such a community, the Vietnamese have struggled to survive and adjust to the socioeconomic realities of life in Houston. While doing so, they have transformed the community by either challenging or altering traditional beliefs about gender roles and physical and mental health to suit their immediate concerns and new perspectives as Vietnamese Americans. Others maintained their Southern Vietnamese identity through anticommunist politics and preservation of the Vietnamese language and culture to serve both as a coping mechanism and a method of survival.

THREE MAJOR WAVES OF VIETNAMESE REFUGEES

A small number of Vietnamese men and women lived and settled in the United States before 1975. In early 1975, fewer than 30,000 lived in this country, with fewer than 100 in Houston, which was home to twenty to forty wives of former servicemen, thirty to fifty students, and a small number of instructors.² The end of the Vietnam War in 1975 brought the first wave of Vietnamese refugees to the United States. The "boat people" who fled the country between the years 1978 to

1982 constituted a second wave. The third wave was made up of the former political detainees and Amerasians who arrived here from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. Throughout each wave, Vietnamese refugees and immigrants came to Houston.

The first wave of Vietnamese refugees included "the originals, those who went out with the Americans and most of the rest of the foreign community in April-May 1975."³ Historian Douglas Pike characterizes this group as "urban, upper class, well-educated, and familiar with American lifestyles."⁴ After the capitulation of Saigon on April 30, 1975, thousands of Vietnamese previously affiliated with the South Vietnamese government (Republic of Vietnam) fled the country.

This first group included a considerably higher percentage of professionals and managers and a much smaller percentage of blue-collar workers than the general Vietnamese population in Vietnam.⁵ A majority of heads of families from the first wave of refugees had at least a secondary school education, which in Southeast Asia was the key to a white-collar job. This pattern changed with the refugees who came after 1977, but a random survey of the Vietnamese in Houston in 1982 demonstrated that a high percentage still held white-collar positions in Vietnam. These were not persons with important careers and high social standing, but were what could be called middle class.⁶

With hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees seeking political freedom in the United States after the fall of Saigon, this mass exodus created a great consternation for the Gerald Ford administration. Thus, four major refugee

camps were set up at U.S. military bases throughout the country: Fort Indian Town Gap in Pennsylvania, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Camp Pendleton in California, and Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. Thousands of Vietnamese arrivals stayed at these makeshift camps for a few months until they were dispersed throughout the U.S. with the assistance of religious organizations, non-profit groups, government programs, and generous American sponsors.

Yet, many Vietnamese newcomers would make a secondary migration. A majority of them decided to resettle in states with a warmer climate, healthier economy, and in California's case, a strong welfare program. As a result, Texas and Louisiana became attractive places for Vietnamese refugees to settle their families. Houston, with its booming economy in the late 1970s, warm weather, and adjacent location to the ocean, became an attractive place for many Vietnamese refugees. Despite the early economic adjustments made by the first wave of refugees, success did not come for all Vietnamese, particularly those who arrived in Houston in the second and third waves of immigration.

The "boat people" of the second wave arrived in the United States under the Refugee Act of 1980, legislation designed to establish a legal framework for admission in response to the massive influx of Vietnamese refugees. These refugees had a more difficult time adjusting to the American way of life.⁷ Their financial woes were harder to overcome and their children's educational performance was not as strong academically as the first wave's children. One of the explanations for this economic and educational distinction was that the earlier Vietnamese refugees came from the educated, professional class in Vietnam. The majority of the second wave refugees and immigrants were from the working class with less education. Vietnamese immigrants who arrived in the 1980s and 1990s did so "with little formal education and few resources, having survived horrible conditions in refugee camps and terrifying voyages across the seas."⁸ Sociologist Stephen Klineberg notes: "Often they speak little English: 47 percent of the Vietnamese respondents in the Asian surveys completed the interviews in their native languages."⁹ These "boat people" had a hard time adapting to the American environment and establishing themselves financially.

In 1988, with the intervention of the

U.S. government, Vietnamese detainees and political prisoners were released en masse. Beginning in 1990, many came to the United States in the third wave of Vietnamese refugees. According to the Office of Refugee Resettlement's 1993 report to Congress, 114,389 detainees arrived in the U.S. from 1990 to 1993.¹⁰

Not all achieved the "American dream," and many still struggle today to make ends meet in Houston. A growing socioeconomic divide exists between the first wave of Vietnamese refugees and the later two waves. The 1975 group of Vietnamese refugees held distinct advantages such as a higher level of education, relatively greater capital, and more knowledge about American society that allowed them to adjust better to life in the U.S. The first wave of Vietnamese refugees received a warmer welcome in the United States as many Americans were feeling the "war guilt" that their Vietnamese counterparts had been left behind by our government. They gained more media attention and thus, greater government and public assistance. The "boat people" of the second wave consisted of a larger contingent of ethnic Chinese refugees with less education, less English skills, and fewer capital. Lastly, and perhaps the group that had the most trouble making social adjustments was the political detainees and Amerasians who came to America.

The former was coping with mental and physical ills from years of imprisonment, and the latter, already a social pariah in Vietnam, struggled to gain social acceptance in the U.S. Nonetheless, all three waves of Vietnamese migrants contributed to the establishment of a community and the reshaping of a Vietnamese identity.

VIETNAMESE RESIDENTIAL SETTLEMENTS

Part of building a visible community is to live and settle in concentrated residential areas. Such residential areas with large Vietnamese populations are clustered throughout the city. Concentrations of Vietnamese Americans are found primarily in three areas of Houston: Southwest, which is the largest concentration; Northwest, the second largest; and Southeast.

Within the Vietnamese American community, smaller residential enclaves exist to further complicate the definition of a community. A large percentage of the third wave of Vietnamese immigrants resides in several run-down apartment complexes known as "villages" throughout the city of Houston. Heavily settled by recent Vietnamese newcomers, these villages include St. Joseph Village, Saigon Village, Thai Xuan Village, Hue Village, St. Mary Village, Da Lat Village, and Thanh Tam Village. Five of the larger villages are located in Southeast Houston on Park



The main entrance to St. Joseph's Condominium. Notice the two Southern Vietnamese flags depicted on the entrance sign. Such symbolic gestures remain important for Vietnamese residents here and, in general, for the local Vietnamese American population, to remember and uphold the ideals of their former country of South Vietnam.

Photograph by Van Pham

Place Boulevard and Broadway Street. Most Vietnamese Americans occupying these low-income apartments in the villages are financially strapped and run into constant financial problems that lead to an overall poor quality in health and below-average living standards. Furthermore, Vietnamese village leaders have little power and resources to remedy the problems that plague the health and living conditions of these fellow renters. More significantly, these Vietnamese villagers remain largely isolated from the rest of the Vietnamese American community and have become a part of the shut-out class in Houston.

At St. Joseph Village, located in the Park Place neighborhood, Vietnamese villagers face problems such as a poor sewer system, lack of maintenance service, and not enough security, according to a recent report by St. Luke's Episcopal Health Charities.¹¹ The 2000 census income data for St. Joseph villagers have shown a higher percentage of those with income \$35,000 or less than the average Houstonian. In the Park Place super neighborhood, approximately 67 percent of the population fits into this economic category. By comparison, 57 percent of Houston's population falls into the household income category of \$35,000 and under.¹² Thus, real income for those residing in the Park Place neighborhood, particularly at St. Joseph Village, falls well below the city's average. Despite economic struggles, some are able to become successful business owners.

BUSINESS DISTRICTS

Vietnamese businesses tend to be located where their ethnic clients reside, adding to the visibility of a community and forging a sense of a cultural identity. For example, the Hong Kong Food Market, the largest chain of Asian grocery stores, is strategically located in these areas of high Asian populations.¹³ Within five years after the fall of Saigon, the number of Vietnamese in Houston was already in the thousands, and various Vietnamese business districts began to take shape in the city. The Vietnamese businesses quickly developed, reviving not only old business districts but expanding other once-decrepit economic sectors as well. The largest Vietnamese business centers are located in the Southwest section of town on Bellaire Boulevard, and the downtown areas of Old Chinatown and the Milam corridor. In Southwest Houston, Bellaire Boulevard and its vicinity

contain hundreds of Vietnamese restaurants, groceries, private medical offices, legal services, auto repair services, churches, temples, realtors, investors, and community centers.

Before the existence of Little Saigon, "Vinatown" was established downtown next to the George R. Brown Convention Center near the old Chinatown. However,



Along the Milam corridor in Midtown, several street signs are given Vietnamese names to further preserve and substantiate the predominantly Vietnamese business district as "Little Saigon."

more and more Vietnamese businesses began moving down the street and farther west along Milam Street. As a result, by the end of the 1980s, a new Little Saigon became the key cultural center for Vietnamese Houstonians to shop, eat, browse, and hang out. Eventually, street signs along the Milam corridor were marked in the Vietnamese language as well. Local Vietnamese American leaders under the direction of My (Michael) Cao Nguyen, then-President of the Vietnamese Community of Houston and Vicinity (VNCH), the official liaison group for the community, managed to pass a resolution to post street signs in Vietnamese language along Milam Street in Midtown.

More recent business developments include the establishment of the Mekong Shopping Center. Popular restaurants such as Mai's Restaurant also cater to the palates of non-Vietnamese Americans while trendy places like Tropioca Tapioca and Coffee caters to a largely young Asian American crowd. Thus, Milam has remained a diverse business district despite the recent gentrification movement as new condominiums and townhouses have been erected to attract middle to upper class Houstonians to Midtown. Nonetheless, Vietnamese immigrants have used Milam Street between

McGowen and Holman streets, the area dedicated as "Little Saigon" in May 2004, as a social, cultural, and commercial center.

SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS OF VIETNAMESE AMERICANS

The success of very visible Vietnamese businesses has fed a common misperception held by many Houstonians that the majority of Vietnamese Americans are doing well financially. In part, due to the "model minority myth" that commonly lumps all Asian Americans as faring well economically and excelling in education, people tend to embrace such a stereotype and incorrectly tag Vietnamese Americans as well-to-do citizens.

Sociologist Stephen Klineberg conducted surveys of Houston's ethnic communities throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.¹⁴ His groundbreaking work thoroughly analyzes the socioeconomic conditions of Houston's Asian Americans and how they compare with white Houstonians and other minorities. He concludes that Vietnamese American businesses have not been as successful as outsiders perceived. In fact, Klineberg's statistics refute the stereotype of the financially successful model minority status that is unfairly tagged on all Asians. This inaccurate label is common among Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian Americans who do not fare economically as well as more prominent groups like the Chinese Americans. He argues, "In terms of income and occupation, the Vietnamese in Houston are doing somewhat better than most Blacks and Hispanics, but they are faring much worse than most other Asians."¹⁵

Klineberg concludes, "The Vietnamese are more likely than the other Asian respondents to be working in semiskilled production work or as unskilled laborers, and they are less likely to be in professional or managerial positions. Six out of ten reported personal earnings of less than \$25,000; this was true of fewer than 40 percent in the other communities." He adds that about 28 percent of the Vietnamese have low-skilled production or laboring jobs, as did 30 percent of their fathers. His final overall assessment realistically suggests that "Houston's Southeast Asian population, including not only the Vietnamese but also growing numbers of Cambodians and Laotians, are encountering far greater difficulty than other Asians in finding adequate employment and support in the

city.” He asserts, “They may also be less likely to receive the help they need, in a language they cannot understand, from a city that continues to believe that all Asians fit the ‘model minority’ image.” In his most recent survey in 2002, Klineberg found that the model minority myth “glosses over the fact that large segments of the Asian population in America are far from prosperous, and make it less likely that impoverished Asians will be given the help that others receive.”¹⁶

Klineberg accurately describes the plight of some Vietnamese Americans in Houston as many of the more recent arrivals continue to struggle financially, lack access and awareness to healthcare services, and live in decrepit housing in low-income neighborhoods. His studies indicate the need for both the local Vietnamese American community and the American mainstream society to recognize and combat these current economic problems.

HEALTHCARE ASSESSMENTS OF VIETNAMESE RESIDENTS IN ALIEF AND PARK PLACE NEIGHBORHOODS

Embedded within these economic concerns are the difficulties in providing access to healthcare services. The importance of healthcare and the practice of home remedies versus Western medicine illustrate an interesting culture clash. The St. Luke’s Episcopal Health Charities (SLEHC) research project conducted by an advisory group headed by Dr. Jane Peranteau focuses on the health conditions and available services for low-income Vietnamese refugees. She focuses on two local areas with a significant concentration of Vietnamese Americans: the Alief super neighborhood and St. Joseph Village in the Park Place area.

Drawing their data from short interviews with current Vietnamese American residents in Alief, the SLEHC advisory group reports several key health concerns, including diabetes, high blood pressure, hepatitis, cancer, and kidney and heart diseases. The interviews suggest that Vietnamese American men smoke too

much, which would lead to health problems later on in life. Vietnamese Americans also voice their concerns about immunization problems, lack of information on nutrition, and the rise in obesity and drug use by their children.

Vietnamese residents in the Alief



It is not at all uncommon to see Vietnamese businesses next to their homes. This photo demonstrates that several residents of Da Lat Condo also opened their own businesses in the same building complex making it more convenient for them. Photograph by Van Pham

neighborhood mention some of the barriers or the lack of access to better health services. According to the SLEHC study, Vietnamese Americans want more health services in Vietnamese so the language barrier would be less daunting. Transportation remains a problem for other Vietnamese Americans as well. As for cultural barriers, Vietnamese Americans declare that historically, Vietnam had no system of preventive care, and as a result, Vietnamese refugees who settled in the U.S. inherit the same attitude toward taking preventive health measures. Furthermore, they have their own ideas about healthcare, using traditional medicine first and then relying on Western medicine should the former method fail to cure their physical ailments. In other cases, they would mix traditional Vietnamese herbs and Western medicine. Using Vietnamese medicine allows them to retain a part of their identity and cultural self-awareness. Yet, many residents are also flexible. Prolonged illnesses will force some residents to be more receptive toward Western medicine and healthcare treatment.

Vietnamese residents at the Park Place neighborhood reaffirm some of Alief residents’ health perspectives toward Western medicine. Western medicine is used to “save your life” whereas traditional medicine “is

used to save your health.” In other words, Vietnamese refugees at St. Joseph’s Village lean on Western medicine for surgery or when they are severely ill. One female village resident stated, “Culture is thousands [of] years; we respect our culture, follow it as [we] can, especially in [our] way of life. Use Oriental medicine first, then try western. Food to have good health, fruit, vegetables; use system of food for diabetes, kidney, liver, high blood pressure.”¹⁷

For Vietnamese women at St. Joseph Village, health services are a primary concern surpassed only by environmental risks. A meeting among Vietnamese mothers insisted that a Vietnamese-speaking medical team should come to the village to give free medical and pharmaceutical services.¹⁸ One woman declared that she “developed a lump in her breast, but it doesn’t hurt so much,” so

she left it alone.¹⁹ The woman went on to add that by the time the lump was painful, it was too late; the cancer had spread. She replied that her children were angry and wanted to sue the doctor who was telling her about her cancer, but she said, “No. It was because I didn’t get checked.”²⁰ Another female resident mentioned that people are afraid to go the doctor because “they will be found sick.”²¹ Thus, for these Vietnamese mothers, their primary area of health needs include the desire to know more about preventive care measures, and the importance of having a Vietnamese-speaking medical team to visit the village on a regular basis and provide free medical check-ups and pharmaceutical advice.

Dr. Peranteau concurs that Vietnamese Americans in the Alief area are better off health-wise than the Vietnamese refugees at St. Joseph because of the former group’s higher income, greater accessibility to healthcare, more support from Vietnamese American organizations, and better insurance coverage.²² The problem for Park Place residents reflects their financial situations, scant information on healthcare services, and inadequate insurance to cover medical expenses.

Nonetheless, residents rely heavily on home remedies to cure their illnesses.

Not only are they attempting to maintain Vietnamese medical traditions by growing herbs to cure common colds or practice “coining,” the rubbing of a Vietnamese ointment (usually a Tiger Balm product) with a sizable coin or spoon on the back of an ill individual, but they are upholding a part of their healthcare identity. Despite the cynicism and ignorance of those who viewed such practices as backwards and even detrimental to one’s health, it is another method of retaining a portion of their heritage. Furthermore, Vietnamese Houstonians are being resourceful and in their minds, practical, for growing medicinal herbs in their backyards or “coining” their sick family members.

One Houston-based organization that tries to meet the health needs of Vietnamese refugees is the Vietnamese-American Community Health Network, Inc. (VACHNET), which has held several health fairs throughout the years.²³ Such health fairs rotated around to different areas of Houston, usually in low-income neighborhoods including several Vietnamese villages to provide free, basic medical care and advice to those who cannot afford it or lack access to treatment. These particular Vietnamese neighborhoods are in the Hobby Airport area, the Bellaire and Alief neighborhoods, and the Veterans Memorial area. Volunteers from a variety of health professions, including pharmacists, dentists, and chiropractors, and even non-health professionals, donate their time to the health fairs. At these fairs, medical services such as blood tests, glucose tests, and free consultations are dispensed to the patients. The attendance has ranged from 300 to 1,000 patients, 85 to 90 percent of whom were Vietnamese Americans. The rest of the attendees included poor whites, Latinos, and Chinese Americans.²⁴

MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS

Many Vietnamese refugees in Houston lack access to mental health treatment due to both the shortage of services and cultural barriers. In recent years, local social services and leading health professionals in the Vietnamese American community have gained ground in raising awareness about mental health symptoms and illnesses, providing more adequate services to meet the population’s needs. One of the most important mental health organizations in Houston is the Asian American Family Services (AAFS), formerly known as the

Asian American Family Counseling Center (AAFCC), which focuses on serving the social needs of Asian American communities, including Vietnamese Americans.²⁵ Kim Szeto, executive director of AAFS, has played an integral part in creating and developing this organization to provide professional private counseling. According to Szeto, most of the new clients are recent Vietnamese immigrants and refugees.²⁶ She also explains that clients who have been in Houston for twenty to twenty-five years are actually more comfortable with using their native language. Thus, AAFS needed counselors who are fluent in Vietnamese in order to communicate and provide proper diagnosis to their Vietnamese patients.

Thach Ho,²⁷ who once worked for the organization as a licensed professional counselor, focuses on counseling Asian American adolescents while also working with adolescents in the general population as well. On Vietnamese perceptions of mental health, Ho believes that people are slowly accepting such concerns, but cautions that change is a slow, arduous process. Ho mentions several areas in mental health that lack attention in the Vietnamese American population. Issues of domestic violence and relationships between men and women are particular concerns that need greater attention among Vietnamese Americans. Coming to the United States, many Vietnamese men face the pressures of finding new jobs, while suffering from the memories of war and the brutal experience of imprisonment as political detainees. Those who do not know how to resolve their mental problems often cope by drinking, gambling, smoking, and reverting to isolation. Many men in the latter waves of refugees were prisoners of war and are still experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Another unfortunate situation that remains largely ignored or denied among Vietnamese Americans is domestic violence. The majority of these cases point to men who physically and verbally abuse their spouses, girlfriends, or daughters. A deficient number of social services and the lack of understanding about what qualifies as domestic violence all too often trap many Vietnamese American

women in prolonged abusive situations.

In one study, a group of Vietnamese mothers met together to discuss their concerns about living conditions at one of the Vietnamese villages in Southeast Houston.²⁸ Some Vietnamese American women in these villages voiced opposition to domestic violence. As for Vietnamese American male villagers, they link their violence toward their wives as a cultural by-product from Vietnam. However, as mentioned before, a change in gender relations and expectations has evolved with their migration to the United States, as both women and men face difficulties redefining family roles.

This change in gender roles between Vietnamese women and men creates tension and in some cases, contributes to domestic violence.²⁹ Even one man dared to proclaim, “You have to be able to hit your wife. Otherwise, how will you teach her?” Furthermore, some of the men interviewed disliked the fact that women and their children, too, knew they could call 911 for help. The village men did not believe that the police had the right to intervene in the family. Even one Vietnamese American immigration lawyer asserted, “I deal with domestic violence and battered women, which is common in Vietnam.”³⁰ Here, the lawyer is connecting Vietnamese traditional gender expectations and what is culturally acceptable in the confines of the family roles to the numerous cases of domestic abuse.

However, Vietnamese American women have responded to such abuse

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This Vietnamese Baptist Church once provided service but has now been abandoned and the local Vietnamese Baptists have relocated to a newly constructed Baptist Church across the street. The only similarity between the old and new Vietnamese Baptist Churches is the burglar bars welded on the window. Photograph by Van Pham

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and have taken action. Despite the fact that many of the Vietnamese women interviewed disapprove of some aspects of American culture, one of them argued that now “women can get in front of men.”³¹ Thus, Vietnamese women who reside in these villages not only realize the changes in gender relations but they identify the need to support positive cultural changes to curb domestic violence.

Vietnamese and Vietnamese American women have always discovered ways to construct their own spheres of womanhood whether in the United States or Vietnam. Vietnamese women in Houston have demanded greater economic independence to meet both the family’s financial necessity and push the boundaries of gender roles to shape and carve out new identities for women within the community. They are not wholly rejecting Vietnamese traditional family values, but instead they continue to embrace strong characteristics within the sphere of Vietnamese femininity to further justify the constant shaping of gender roles in the United States. The reception toward seeking outside professional help remains lukewarm at best. Yet, more and more Vietnamese Americans embrace a cultural



Two Vietnamese women are sitting in the decorated living room with a backdrop of photos of family members. Both women reside at Thai Xuan Village.

Photograph by Van Pham

change, seeking professional counseling to resolve personal matters or family issues. This is an assertive attempt to combat the current social ostracism attached to seeking mental healthcare. There are Vietnamese counselors and patients who are fighting the social stigma that comes with seeking outside professional assistance, and therefore, outright challenging that mental health is a cultural taboo in Vietnamese society.

THE THIRD RED SCARE: VIETNAMESE AMERICAN IDENTITY AND ANTI- COMMUNIST POLITICS

Despite their squalid housing conditions and concerns about healthcare, the villages maintain a sense of “Vietnamese-ness” which helps to reconstruct their own way of living. Furthermore, many residents remark that they continue to live in these villages for several reasons—the relative security of their villages, the ability to trust their neighbors, inexpensive housing, and being able to use the Vietnamese language. Impoverished living conditions do not sway them from building a Catholic chapel, operating ESL and computer classes, or raising the Republic of Vietnam flags at the main entrance. For example, in front of the Thai Xuan Village on Broadway Street, a large Southern Vietnamese flag flaps alongside the U.S. and Texas flags. Political events, staged rallies, and demonstrations held every April 30th to remember the fall of Saigon, are filled with thousands of participants pledging allegiance to the Southern Vietnamese flag. They sing patriotic hymns about their homeland while denouncing the past and present atrocities committed by the Vietnamese Communist regime.

Outsiders tend to believe that Asian Americans and in this case, Vietnamese Americans, are just “fence-sitters” when it comes to politics and civic participation. Thus, not much has been written about the development of a Vietnamese American

Erected earlier this year, two statues honor the Southern Vietnamese soldiers and refugees of the Vietnam War. One statue depicts a Vietnamese family in refuge to remember the experiences of those who fled from their native land. Both statues are located in the parking lot of the Universal Center shopping plaza on Bellaire Boulevard.



political identity that has been refracted through the lens of the Cold War and its negative consequences. Anticomunist sentiment and dogma had its roots in Southern Vietnam. The majority of Vietnamese refugees who fled after the fall of Saigon and had supported the Republic

of Vietnam regime were fortunate enough to migrate safely to the U.S. Because they did not follow Ho Chi Minh, they became angered by the significant material and emotional loss from the Communists' victory in the war.

Founded in 1981 by former South

Vietnamese military officers in California, the National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam, or simply the Front, offered refugees a plan to retake their homeland.³² The scheme to raise a guerrilla army in countries bordering Vietnam sounded far-fetched, but was nonetheless enticing. Strong anticomunist sentiment gained momentum in the late 1970s and early 1980s as the Front garnered popular support not just in California, but in Houston and other established Vietnamese American enclaves as well. With popular backing, the group amassed millions of dollars as more Vietnamese Americans donated money to the organization. The financial donors believed they were aiding a good cause—to assist the Front's guerrilla war in Southeast Asia in an attempt to throttle the Vietnamese Communists.

One local Vietnamese American journalist skeptical of the group's financial spending and political tactics conducted research on the Front. Phong Dam Nguyen, a Vietnamese journalist, left Saigon in 1975 and started a newspaper in Houston called *Tu Do*, meaning "freedom."³³ Nguyen exposed fake refugee aid programs and reported on other groups deemed dishonest.³⁴ Although he was a fierce anticomunist, Nguyen dedicated what became his last issues of *Tu Do* newspaper to a series accusing the Front's leaders of fraud.

What followed was no surprise. Nguyen's paper received anonymous phone threats, fellow journalists pleaded him to back off, and Nguyen even started carrying a gun. His fears were well deserved, and unfortunately, he was murdered at the doorstep of his house in the southeast neighborhood of Houston in the early morning of August 25, 1982. Vietnamese American community members of almost every stripe believed it was the Front that killed Nguyen. One Vietnamese American who wanted to remain anonymous stated, "Unfortunately for him, anticomunism ran so deep in 1982 that some Houston refugees believed that anyone who blocked the Front deserved to die. And that anyone included Nguyen Dam Phong."³⁵

The crime remains unsolved to this day. Vietnamese American community leaders and the Houston Police Department (HPD) suspected his assassination was the direct result of articles he published about the Front. The HPD report pointed to the anticomunist organization as

Vietnamese American Women as Nail Salon Entrepreneurs

One successful occupation among Vietnamese American women in Houston has been the discount nail salon industry that came into local prominence during the early 1980s. In major urban areas from the West Coast to the South, a significant portion of nail salon owners are Vietnamese women, and Houston is no exception. According to one local study on Vietnamese women and the discount nail salon industry, one of the first Vietnamese salon owners in Houston opened for business in 1981.¹ Thao Ha writes that "Vietnamese women who started their nail salons were able to help friends and family members by giving them advice on the business, showing them techniques, and giving them their first jobs as nail salon technicians. She adds, "Soon, those who started as nail technicians saved enough money to start their own shop." Ads were placed in Vietnamese-language newspapers showing interested women where to go to school, apply for those schools, and be trained as nail technicians.²

The author reports, "Before the Vietnamese entered into this business, there were only upscale nail salons. The discount nail salon simply did not exist in Houston, therefore, vacancies were abundant, and there was no interethnic competition for those vacancies."³ Since the Vietnamese refugees were willing to work for lower costs, thus charging their clients half the price of the upscale salons, they were able to fill the vacuum of the discount nail salon business, as they provide service to the masses.

Over five hundred listings of nail salons were included in the 2000 Greater Houston Southwestern Bell Yellow Pages, "with a large percentage of them owned and operated by Vietnamese."⁴ Vietnamese immigrants would choose the discount nail salon industry for a variety of reasons. Since many lacked skills and capital, they applied to beauty schools since tuition was inexpensive and the hours of schooling were minimal. Plus, to overcome language barriers, schools of cosmetology were opened and operated by Vietnamese for Vietnamese. Opening a nail salon industry required little capital as well.⁵ Finally, despite their little educational credentials and small knowledge of English, once they opened for business, shop owners could earn up to six figures per year while manicurist employees could make between \$40,000 to \$60,000 a year.⁶ Local Vietnamese women, through their hard work, perseverance, and business savvy, have created an economic niche for themselves, providing them and their families with greater financial security. Knowingly or unknowingly, they have created a Vietnamese American socioeconomic phenomenon.



U.S.A. Nail at the Universal Center on Bellaire Boulevard. U.S.A. Nail is just one of many nail salon supply stores owned and operated by Vietnamese Americans.

Vietnamese Shrimpers Clash with the Ku Klux Klan

One of the prime reasons many Vietnamese refugees migrated to Houston was the city's adjacent location to the ocean where many of them could work in the fishing and shrimping industries. The first Vietnamese refugees came to the Gulf Coast in 1975 to take jobs in seafood processing plants.¹ Their numbers were few, and most had migrated there after first settling in some other part of the country. By 1985, there were approximately 2,000 Vietnamese living between Corpus Christi and Galveston Bay.² These Vietnamese refugees worked hard to make a decent living and for the most part, many did not violate the law except for breaking minor shrimping and fishing state regulations. However, they did not imagine that their hard work would generate fear as an economic threat to many native Texans along the coast. This included even a clash with the Ku Klux Klan. *Alamo Bay* (1985), a movie starring Ed Harris and Amy Madigan, depicted the heightened racial tensions between Vietnamese and Texan shrimpers.³

The most intense conflicts took place in the Harris-Galveston County area. The first incident occurred in January 1981 when a Vietnamese shrimp boat in Seabrook was damaged by arson.⁴ Two months later, another fire destroyed a Vietnamese-owned boat and damaged a second. At a rally in the Galveston County city of Santa Fe in February 1981, Klansmen burned a shrimp boat replica in effigy and instructed listeners on how such fires should be set. In June 1983, Klan members in full regalia paraded through Seabrook, carrying a casket draped with an American flag.⁵ Nevertheless, the Klan's attempt to demonstrate, brandish weapons, burn effigies, and harass the local Vietnamese American shrimpers failed to thwart the growing dominance of the refugees in the shrimping business. By 1990, the Vietnamese Texans had all but monopolized the Seabrook shrimp business.⁶

Despite years of prosperity and peace along the coast during the aftermath, the encounter with the Klan left an indelible mark on the consciences of Vietnamese American shrimpers and fishermen. They did not expect such a confrontation and hostile reaction from native Texans who felt threatened by the presence of a large wave of Vietnamese who worked hard and spoke little English. As the economic recession hit Texas during the late 1980s, many Vietnamese Americans left the coast to work in other industries such as food packing or opening up their own nail salons.

the main suspect. Four other Vietnamese journalists were killed between 1981 and 1990, including Lam Trong Duong in San Francisco, Tap Van Pham in Garden Grove, California, and Nhan Trong Do and Triet Le in Fairfax County, Virginia. These reporters all revealed that the Front collected donations from Vietnamese immigrants under the pretense of supporting freedom fighters in Vietnam. Instead, the reports alleged that millions of dollars were funneled to a massive public relations organization, its own magazine, a fishing fleet, and a worldwide chain of restaurants.³⁶

The horrific murder of Phong Dam Nguyen marked a tragedy for his surviving family members and friends. In the long run, the fervent anticommunist sentiment blinded the Vietnamese American community and derailed any discourse for a participatory democracy and wide-

open political environment. Such use of violence by a politicized group hindered any development of democratization within the Vietnamese American population. Eventually, leaders of the Front were indicted by the FBI for money laundering, extortion, bribery, and misappropriation of funds when members used funds to run their own restaurant chain and even adult films. Along with these scandals and the death of the group's leader, Admiral Minh Co Hoang (whose failed attempt to raise an anticommunist guerrilla army in Southeast Asia ended with his death), the alluring power of the Front turned into broken promises and dreams leading to its decline by the early 1990s.

Many Vietnamese Americans remain hesitant to respond to communal activism or to take political initiative for fear of retribution from authorities. According

to a local study, there exists "an underlying deep, historically rooted suspicion of organized community efforts" among the Vietnamese residents in Alief.³⁷ Tracing the historical roots of anti-authoritarianism or fear of taking political actions, the report finds that "domination by the Chinese, the French, and the Communists has left the Vietnamese with an antipathy toward any organization that seems political." Furthermore, the report indicates that "the background of prospective community leaders is particularly important," since local Vietnamese were often suspicious of those who had returned to visit Vietnam.

Out of this unhealthy political environment arises political red-baiting and intolerance for those who do not espouse rigid anticommunist views. Some Vietnamese American politicians slander their opponents for supposedly favoring communistic agendas or seek to improve their candidacies by presenting themselves more anticommunist than their opponents. Even those who do not hold staunch anti-communist sentiment may embrace such beliefs for political survival. Thus, they pretend to express such conservative, anti-communist views to receive support from the community's majority and enhance their political careers.

Some would argue that anticommunist politics is a necessary vehicle to establish a Vietnamese identity and community with a sense of unity and cohesion. Particularly after the destructiveness of war, perilous refugee journeys, and uncertainties that resettlement brings, anticommunist politics became an attractive and stable force for the community. However, such antiquated Cold War rhetoric does not necessarily fit within the current political landscape. A generation removed from the Vietnam War, there is a need to create a healthier political environment in the community that allows greater political participation and diverse opinions without entirely abandoning the first generation's belief system, especially as the next generation comes to maturation.

MEDIA, LANGUAGE PRESERVATION, AND CULTURAL CELEBRATIONS

Another source of community building and identity formation is the rise of various Vietnamese media sources that provide a sense of unity and a shared history. The local Vietnamese American population attained substantial success in establishing

Vietnamese-friendly media outlets as well. Currently, there are four Vietnamese language radio stations, and several weekly magazines and newspapers written in their native language and highly accessible to Vietnamese readers. The most popular local media sources are the radio stations, which thousands of Vietnamese Americans tune in to for local news and updated reports about Vietnam and the world. As of 2005, the four major Vietnamese radio stations include Radio Saigon Houston, TNT (Vietnamese Radio Network), VOVN (Voice of Vietnam), and one of the most popular choices, Little Saigon Radio.

Thuy Thanh Vu and Phuoc Duong are heavily involved in Little Saigon Radio. "Ethnic radio is very different because you live by and for the community," said Vu.³⁸ They look at their work on the radio as something of a mission: "The more Vietnamese understand American society," stated Vu, "the more they can contribute."³⁹ On their morning news show, the couple gathers news from CNN, the Internet, and the *Houston Chronicle*. "We give them briefs and tidbits and tell them the headlines and page numbers of what to read," Vu said. "We want to get them in the habit of reading newspapers."

The local Vietnamese media provides its audience with important information on current events, social issues, and political activities. This knowledge allows many Vietnamese Americans the opportunity to be more educated in certain topics. Whether it means getting the latest news on the war in Iraq, or finding out about where to receive medical checkups, or even listening to traditional Vietnamese operas, newspapers like *Ngay Nay* (Today), magazines such as *Dep* (Beauty), and radio stations all provide a communication outlet that bridges the language gap for thousands of Vietnamese American listeners, especially the elderly.

Another mode of identity can be traced to the main language spoken at home. According to the Census 2000 figures, only 6.9 percent of Vietnamese residents speak English regularly at home.⁴⁰ Essentially, a large portion of the Vietnamese American population continues to use their native language at home. However, such census figures fail to measure the discordance from one generation to another. They do not portray the likelihood that Vietnamese is spoken and used on a more regular basis

by the first generation of Vietnamese Americans than the second generation. One of the growing concerns between the Vietnamese-born parent generation and their American-born children is the widened language gap between them that has created a communication barrier. These social communication breakdowns can create or enhance family problems when members are trying to discuss daily matters, such as spending enough time on homework, dating, and respecting your elders.

Currently, there have been efforts to preserve the Vietnamese language for the next generation. Throughout small rooms in temples and churches, teachers, laypeople, and volunteers have taught *Viet Ngu* courses to children and young adults. Furthermore, recent efforts were successful in creating Vietnamese language and culture courses on college campuses such as Houston Community College and the University of Houston.

Cultural festivals and holidays are other examples of preserving and celebrating the Vietnamese culture. Both older and younger generations intermingle and share a united celebration during the Lunar New Year holiday or *Tet*, held annually in accordance with the cycle of the moon. The *Tet* celebration allows not only a way to remember and retain some traditions of a Vietnamese culture, but is also a time when young and old Vietnamese-speaking or English-speaking members of the community can join together and wish each other good luck for the new year. More recently, the *Tet* celebration allows some people to remember Vietnam and others to embrace the rapid growth and contribution as a community in the greater Houston area.

"There's a lot of displays of how we escaped from Vietnam, and we remember it and are proud of what we achieved," said Linda Van Tran at one Lunar New Year celebration.⁴¹ She continued, "The older people, they still love their country. They want to remember the struggle even though they love living in America."

Such an event gave Tony Linh and many others a chance to remember the old country, especially Saigon. "People around the world, they may call it Ho Chi Minh City now because that's what's on the map," said Linh.⁴² "In our minds, in our hearts, we still call it Saigon, because that's what we remember."

CONCLUSION

The Vietnamese in Houston have actively redefined their identity out of the ashes of the Cold War, and the difficulties of refuge and resettlement in America. As a result, they have settled in Houston and established their own residential enclaves and business districts. Growing concerns about domestic violence and physical and mental health issues are no longer ignored cultural taboos. Gender relations and family roles have been altered to a degree. Anticommunist politics that once led to violence have now tempered, as community activists seek to develop a true participatory democracy in the community. Attempts at language and cultural preservation have been made to instill the "Vietnamese-ness" in future generations. Vietnamese Americans have chosen to reconstruct an identity to suit their social, political, and economic needs in order to further develop and stabilize their community. Like millions of immigrants and refugees that arrived in the United States before them, Vietnamese Americans are not necessarily poor, hungry, and faceless victims, but are rather active agents of history, adding their own rich, personal experiences to the developing multicultural society of America. ■



University of Houston students gather together inside the front entrance of Hong Kong Food Market #4 on Bellaire Boulevard to fundraise for Vietnamese language courses at UH.