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A Vietnamese Family in the United States from 1975-1985: A Case Study in Education and Culture

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A VIETNAMESE REFUGEE FAMILY IN THE UNITED STATES
FROM 1975-1985: A CASE STUDY
IN EDUCATION AND CULTURE

by

Nancy Prendergast

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate
School of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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To my husband, David, I will always be indebted. His steady support and constant encouragement were always sources of inspiration. Without him, it would have been a long, lonesome journey indeed.

VITA

Nancy Elizabeth Prendergast was born March 12, 1953 in Oak Park, Illinois, to Edward and Mary Ulbricht.

After completing her secondary education at West Chicago Community High School in 1971, she entered Northern Illinois University in De Kalb, Illinois. A student at Northern for two years, she studied abroad at the University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, England in her junior year. She returned to Northern where she received her Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in English and minors in Philosophy and Art History in 1975. She began her Master's degree in Literature and Linguistics by studying at University College, Oxford, England in the summer of 1975. Her Master's degree was awarded in 1977 from Northern Illinois University.

Since that time, Ms. Prendergast has been employed as an English instructor and administrator. In the summer of 1982, she taught at Pilgrims English Language Institute in Canterbury, Kent, England. She presently serves as the Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences at Triton College in River Grove, Illinois. In 1983, she married David Brent Prendergast of Cold Lake, Alberta, Canada.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
VITA	iii
CONTENTS OF APPENDICES	vi
 Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Purpose of the Study	6
Significance of the Study	7
Methodology of the Study	8
Procedure of the Study	12
II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE	18
Chinese Influence on Vietnamese Education	18
French Influence on Vietnamese Education	22
Vietnamese Education: 1955-1975	32
Vietnamese Refugee Education in the United States: 1975-1984	49
Summary	64
III. HISTORY OF THE VIETNAMESE FAMILY AND THE EXODUS	68
The Families	68
Religion	72
Education	76
Flight from Vietnam	87
IV. RESETTLEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES	93
The Refugee Camps	93
Educational and Social Programs: Sponsorship	106
The American University	114
V. ADJUSTMENT, UPWARD MOBILITY, AND ACCEPTANCE	125
Employment	125
Housing	137
Three Generations	139

VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	146
The Future	146
Summary	150
Conclusions	153
Limitations of the study	159
Recommendations	160
REFERENCES	161
APPENDIX A	168
APPENDIX B	172

CONTENTS OF APPENDICES

	Page
APPENDIX A Chronology	168
APPENDIX B Map of Refugee Flight	172

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Since April 30, 1975, after the United States withdrew its troops from Vietnam, over two million refugees fled Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.¹ Of those refugees, approximately 130,000 Vietnamese sought asylum in the United States.² Four resettlement camps around the country began a reeducation process that continued both formally and informally as refugees were filtered from the camps to their American sponsors, schools, universities, and employers throughout the fifty states.

Educating the Vietnamese refugee posed unprecedented challenges and problems for U.S. educators. First, the great influx of refugees, like the fall of the Saigon government, was rapid and unexpected, leaving both Vietnamese and Americans unprepared and unequipped. Bruce Grant's description of the evacuation of refugees in Saigon

¹ Isamu Ando, ed., Refugees -- The Cry of the Indochinese (Tokyo: Asian Relations Center, 1980), p. 53.

² Gail Paradise Kelly, From Vietnam to America: A Chronicle of the Vietnamese Immigration to the United States (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1977), p. 2.

is indicative of the panic and insecurity that struck both Vietnamese and Americans:

In the early hours of 30 April the U.S. marines were still keeping the crowd at bay outside the U.S. embassy. Frantic Vietnamese, many of them waving legitimate chits entitling them to evacuation, were being beaten back with rifle butts and fists. Some of them had been there for the last twenty-four hours, watching the Air America and Marine helicopters ferry the lucky ones out to the Sixth fleet. Marines helped westerners over the embassy wall, stomping on the fingers of Vietnamese who tried to climb after them. . . . The evacuation rapidly became a shambles as mobs gathered around the secret pick-up points. The CIA was unable to rescue hundreds of its Vietnamese agents. As the Marine rearguard withdrew to the roof and their getaway helicopter they dropped tear-gas grenades down the lift shafts, the smell of which lingered in the looted building for days afterwards.³

Unprepared to evacuate many of its Vietnamese supporters, the United States was almost equally unprepared to receive Vietnam's emigrants. Four resettlement camps were hastily established at Camp Pendleton in California, Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, and Elgin Air Force Base in Florida. The purpose of these camps was to "process" refugees as quickly as possible into American society. A review of English As a Second Language materials or any other pedagogical guides targeted to a Vietnamese population reveals that few pieces were available before 1976, although one guide, An Organization and Welcome Guide for Groups Sponsoring Indochinese Refugees, was printed in July, 1975, by the Interagency Task Force for Indochina Refugees. Noting this lack of available material,

³ Bruce Grant, The Boat People (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1979), p. 13.

Ellen Matthews, an educator who sponsored a Vietnamese family from April, 1975, to 1979, wrote: "If realistic information can be gotten out at the beginning of a program, when refugees from an unfamiliar culture first arrive, rather than two or more years later, that would be invaluable."⁴

A second problem which faced American educators in the wake of the Vietnamese refugee influx was the perhaps too effective dispersal of refugees among the fifty states. Tran Tuong Nhu notes that "the refugees were scattered throughout the fifty states in an attempt to absorb them quietly into the mythical melting pot."⁵ Yet by doing so, government officials created a situation for educators where, according to Burmark and Kim:

. . . the majority of school districts across America have reported less than one hundred refugee children, totalling less than one percent of their enrollment. . . . It was not uncommon for a school district with less than one hundred Vietnamese children to have only two or three of them₆ enrolled in any one school under its jurisdiction.

The effect of this was that teachers with special English As a Second Language skills and appropriate materials had to be shared from school to school, or students had to be bused to

⁴Ellen Matthews, Culture Clash (Chicago: Intercultural Press, 1982), p. 133.

⁵Tran Tuong Nhu, "The Trauma of Exile: Viet-Nam Refugees," Civil Rights Digest 9 (Fall 1976): 60.

⁶Lynell Burmark and Hyung-chan Kim, "The Challenge of Educating Vietnamese Children in American Schools," Integrated Education 91 (January-February 1978): 3.

key learning centers. The kind of individual and unique attention a Vietnamese refugee student required was indeed complicated by an all too effective government processing system.

A third challenge that faced the U.S. educator in accomodating the Vietnamese refugee was the general lack of cultural and linguistic understanding that existed (and still exists) between Western and Eastern cultures. Unlike the Western European immigrant and refugee who came to the United States with a Western heritage and, in almost every case, speaking an Indo-European language, the Vietnamese refugee brought with him a language and culture virtually unknown in the United States. In The Tongue-Tied American, Paul Simon criticized this linguistic deficiency: "Before our heavy intervention in Vietnam, fewer than five American-born experts on Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos--in all of our universities and the State Department combined--could speak with ease one of the languages of that area."⁷ What is equally dismaying is that "the latest figures [as of 1980] show that only twenty-nine persons in our country are enrolled in a course to study the Vietnamese language."⁸

Few, if any, of the Vietnamese refugees who came to the United States came without great emotional distress. A

⁷ Paul Simon, The Tongue-Tied American: Confronting the Foreign Language Crisis (New York: Continuum, 1980), p. 9.

⁸ Ibid.

fourth problem, therefore, challenged U.S. educators: to instruct the Vietnamese refugee student in the American classroom experiencing not only a cultural and linguistic gap with his fellow students and teachers, but an emotional abyss which separated him as well. In Buu Tri's guide for U.S. educators working with Vietnamese students, Tri reminded Americans that Vietnamese students "have left behind in their beloved country the most precious things in their lives, like ancestral burial places and their way of life."⁹ That refugee students may not have been able to concentrate on English verb conjugations or American history is not surprising, knowing that they may have been yearning for the homes, friends, and families that had been lost to them forever.

A fifth problem that besieged American educators in working with the Vietnamese refugee students was the economic climate in the United States at the time of their arrival. In Vietnamese Americans: Patterns of Resettlement and Socioeconomic Adaption in the United States, David Montero pointed out that in 1975 the country was in the midst of an economic recession:

The Vietnamese refugees arrived in the United States at a time when the rate of unemployment was almost 9 percent. Many Americans feared that the refugees would take jobs from American citizens or be an added drain on

⁹ Buu Tri, Han Hanh Duoc Gap (Happy to Meet You) (n.p.: Pennsylvania Department of Education, 1976), p. 13.

the already overburdened public assistance rolls.¹⁰ Educators, struggling with budget cuts to mainstream programs, were challenged even more to seek adequate assistance for this new and special population. Further, these economic hardships only added to some feelings of prejudice directed against this new wave of Asian refugees.

The combination of these circumstances, including the rapidity of the Vietnamese refugee arrival, their dispersal across the fifty states, the lack of cultural and linguistic understanding, the refugees' emotional suffering, and the economic recession, created for American educators unique challenges and opportunities. However, it is important to remember that these unique challenges and opportunities were faced by the Vietnamese refugee as well.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of particular educational programs for the Vietnamese refugee based on an in-depth study of one Vietnamese family's ten-year experience with resettlement camps, English As a Second Language programs, orientation programs, college education, and college reeducation in the United States. The effectiveness of refugee education has often involved superimposing American values and standards

¹⁰ David Montero, Vietnamese Americans: Patterns of Resettlement and Socioeconomic Adaptation in the United States (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1979), p. 4.

of success upon the refugee. For example, studies which have surveyed Vietnamese levels of education and occupation as measures of success may be overlooking a trait characteristic of Vietnamese culture, i.e.:

As a rule, Vietnamese are not goal-or-success-oriented . . . most are not pushy, most do not know what it means to 'get ahead,' and most are not aggressive. . . . This lack of aggression has been interpreted as a lack of drive by the Americans who used to work in Vietnam, but it is merely an expression of a different approach and outlook as well as a reaction at times to their treatment by Americans.¹¹

It is the purpose here to examine the success of education for the refugee based on his understanding and assessment of it. The assumption, therefore, is in line with the cross-cultural work of anthropologists who, like Franz Boas, contend that "If it is our serious purpose to understand the thoughts of a people, the whole analysis of experience must be based on their concepts, not ours."¹²

The Significance of the Study

This study is significant for three reasons. First, it will attempt to assess selected special educational programs for the refugee as well as mainstream educational programs for their usefulness to the refugee based on his perceptions and evaluations of them. Such information could be invaluable to educators, social workers, and

¹¹Nhu, "Trauma of Exile," p. 61.

¹²Franz Boas, "Recent Anthropology," Science, 98 (1943): 314.

psychologists who are currently working with Vietnamese refugees. Secondly, the research may provide another dimension of a framework from which future studies of refugee education may be conducted. Finally, this in-depth case study will preserve an oral history of one refugee family's education in the United States during a critical political and educational period in this country.

The Methodology of the Study

Working intensively with a Vietnamese family for ten months posed a unique set of research, emotional, and psychological challenges. Like all case studies, this one required that an enormous amount of time be committed to observing, interviewing, discussing, and probing the lives of a few select individuals.

The life history, a particular form of the case study, may take many shapes. Four definitions will be summarized here. One of the earliest definitions of the life history was provided by John Dollard in 1935:

We will propose an initial common sense definition of the life history as a deliberate attempt to define the growth of a person in a cultural milieu and to make theoretical sense of it. . . . From this standpoint the life history is an account of how a person is added to the group and becomes an adult capable of meeting the traditional expectations of his society for a person of his sex and age.

Dollard stressed that the subject of the life history must

¹³ John Dollard, Criteria for the Life History (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1935), p. 3.

be viewed as a part of a cultural series, and that: In the end, the individual appears as a person, as a microcosm of the group features of his culture. It is possible that detailed studies of the lives of individuals will reveal new perspectives on the culture as a whole which are not accessible when one remains on the formal cross-sectional plane of observation.¹⁴

Later, in the 1970's, Howard Becker defined the life history by contrasting it to fiction and autobiography:

As opposed to these more imaginative and humanistic forms, the life history is more down to earth, more devoted to our purposes than those of the author, less concerned with artistic values than with a faithful rendering of the subject's¹⁵ experience and interpretation of the world he lives in.

Not for aesthetic beauty, but for deeper insight into human behavior, the life history, according to Becker, should accomplish the following functions:

1. Even though the life history does not in itself provide definitive proof of a proposition, it can be a negative case that forces us to decide a proposed theory is inadequate.
2. The life history can be particularly useful in giving us insight into the subjective side of much-studied institutional processes, about which unverified assumptions are also often made.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁵ Howard S. Becker, Sociological Work: Method and Substance (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1970), p. 64.

3. The life history, by virtue again of its wealth of detail, can be important at those times when an area of study has grown stagnant, has pursued the investigation of a few variables with ever-increasing precision but has received dwindling increments of knowledge from the pursuit.
4. The life history, more than any other technique, can give meaning to the overworked notion of process.¹⁶

A third definition came from Norman Denzin, who in 1978 wrote, "The life history presents the experience and definitions held by one person, one group, or one organization as this person, group, or organization interprets those experiences."¹⁷ Four assumptions of the life history are that: (1) human conduct is to be studied and understood from the perspective of the person involved; (2) the researcher will relate the perspective elicited to definitions and meanings that are lodged in social relationships and social groups; (3) the researcher becomes a historian of social life, recording the unfolding history of one person's, one group's, or one organization's experiences; and (4) the life history presents a person's experiences as he or she defines them.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 67-69.

¹⁷ Norman Denzin, The Research Act (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), p. 215.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 216.

A fourth and most recent definition of the life history was provided in 1982 by Bogdan and Biklen, who described the three ways in which a first person narrative could be collected:

Historians who do this kind of work often interview famous people (presidents and generals) to get the details of history as the people interviewed participated in it. When they interview less famous people (domestics or farmers, for instance), they are more interested in how history appears from the point of view of the 'common person.' Sociological or psychological first-person life histories collected through case study interviewing are usually directed at using the person as a vehicle to understand basic aspects of human behavior or existing institutions rather than history.

To Bogdan and Biklen, the process for the three types of life histories was similar; the results differed based on the subjects being interviewed and the intent of the researcher.

To summarize, the individual's life history may give us, as Dollard has pointed out, a microcosm of the group features of the individual's culture. The life history is neither fiction nor autobiography, but a faithful rendering and interpretation of a person's world, according to Becker. Denzin agreed, adding that the life history defines the world as the subject himself understands and interprets it. Further, Bogdan and Biklen advocated that the life history is an excellent means through which an understanding of

¹⁹ Robert C. Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen, Qualitative Research for Education (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1982), p. 61.

human behavior or institutions may be obtained.

Denzin has discussed three kinds of life histories: the complete, covering the entire sweep of the subject's life; the topical, presenting only one phase of the subject's life; and the edited, including continual interspersing of comments, explanations, and questions by the researcher.²⁰ The life history presented here is edited and topical--topical in that the phase of the subjects' lives being presented concerns primarily the period right before emigration and the period following refugee status. The life history of the Vietnamese family has been organized chronologically according to the major phases occurring in the refugees' lives. This organization has been designed to illustrate the changes and transitions from one status to another. Therefore, a clearer picture of the assimilation and educational process of the refugee can emerge.

The Procedure of the Study

Five members of a Vietnamese extended family living in a Chicago suburb were the subjects of this case study. Only two of the members provided substantial data, however, as the grandmother spoke little English and the children, aged 6 and 4, had limited verbal skills and educational experience. The two main subjects were the husband and wife, 33-year-old Vietnamese refugees who met and married in

²⁰Denzin, The Research Act, pp. 217-218.

the United States. Their life histories were collected through case study interviewing, observation, and open-ended questionnaires, with the intent of gathering their perceptions, understandings, and assessments of American educational institutions. The subjects were chosen because they met the three major criteria for subjects of a life history case study: (1) They were articulate and had good memories, (2) They lived through the kinds of experiences and participated in the types of organizations and events I wanted to explore, and (3) They had the time to give to the project.²¹

The case study data collection over a nine-month period, from April to December, 1984, included the following:

1. Observation of the family in their own apartment, on their job, at predominantly Vietnamese gatherings, at predominantly American gatherings, and at American restaurants, on at least one occasion per month
2. Interviews with the subjects lasting from one hour minimum to five hours maximum on both a formal and informal basis, at least once a month
3. Interviews of people who were friends of the subjects and of colleagues from the subjects' jobs
4. Open-ended questionnaires with extended written

²¹ Bogdan and Biklen, Qualitative Research for Education, p. 61.

responses from the subjects

5. Review of available written documents: letters, notes, homework assignments, etc.
6. Review of published source material on Vietnamese and Vietnamese refugee education

Preparation for observation included drawing up a list of items to be observed in various situations such as the type of clothing the subjects wore, the frequency with which subjects used the Vietnamese language instead of English, under what circumstances and to whom did subjects speak Vietnamese, the fluency of their English, their body language and eye contact, the type of newspapers in their apartment, and their punctuality and concept of time. After each meeting, notes were written on each of the items intended to be observed.

Open-ended interviewing was another invaluable source of data. In Qualitative Research in Education, Michael Patton enumerated three basic approaches to collecting qualitative data through open-ended interviewing: the informal conversational interview, the general interview guide approach, and the standardized open-ended interview.²² All three approaches were used to obtain data in this study. During the informal conversational interview, maximum flexibility was maintained while most of the questions and

²²Michael Patton, Qualitative Evaluation Methods (Beverly Hills, Cal.: SAGE Publications, 1980), p. 197.

responses were derived from the immediate context. Notes were written after the interview/observation situation. The general interview guide approach was used in working with the family as a group. A list of questions and issues to be discussed was drawn up prior to the interview. Responses to the topics were recorded through a tape-recording device which proved less inhibiting than note-taking (although copious notes were recorded after each session had ended). In the standardized open-ended interview, the exact wording and sequence of questions were drawn up prior to the interview and followed during the interview which was tape-recorded and/or recorded in written notes. Some of these interviews were done individually to avoid one member's influencing another's responses.

In addition to gathering information through observation and interviewing, open-ended questionnaires were given to the subjects to respond to in written form. These were given to augment as well as to check the consistency of information gleaned from observation and oral interviews. Therefore, some questions on the written questionnaire were purposely identical to questions asked in the interviews.

Finally, a review of available written documents, letters, notes, and homework assignments of the subjects was completed. The available written documentation, which would be meaningful to this study was scarce, however. Other published source material on the subject fell into two

categories: literature on Vietnamese education from 1970 to 1975, and literature on Vietnamese refugee education in the United States from 1975 to the present. Both time periods were important in that they coincided with the educational settings and experience of the subjects. A comparison between the subjects' experiences and the published materials naturally evolved from the study.

In order to verify the findings, several means were used to determine their consistency and validity:

1. Observational data was compared with interview data
2. Interview responses were checked against responses in written questionnaires
3. Consistency of responses over the nine-month period was checked
4. Responses of friends and colleagues were compared with subjects' responses
5. Responses of subjects in one situation (e.g., in private) were checked against responses of subjects in a different situation (e.g., in public)

Two limitations of the study involved the size of the sample and the time at which the data was collected. Generalizations drawn from the data must be carefully delineated and qualified as the experience of a given family and not necessarily that of an entire refugee group. Nonetheless, it is hoped that some worthwhile and salient insights have evolved from the study which are relevant to

the more general Vietnamese refugee education experience. A second limitation involved the lapse of time between the first United States educational experiences of the subjects and their description of those experiences. A ten-year distance may hinder one's memory under normal conditions-- how much more might this be true under the traumatic conditions caused by postwar relocation? In this situation, however, the temporal distance proved advantageous in providing the subjects with a more mature, if not valid, perspective on their experiences. Had they been interviewed immediately after their arrival, both subjects felt that the trauma of their flight to the United States, coupled with their weak language skills and general insecurity, would have resulted in a history only marginally, if at all, useful. Moreover, it was the intent of this study to examine a Vietnamese refugee family's experience in the United States after a nine-year period to obtain a developmental perspective on their educational and cultural experience here. In order to preserve the anonymity of the family, their names have been changed in this study. The interviews cited in the study were conducted by the author from April through December, 1984, in River Forest and Melrose Park, Illinois. Tapes of the interviews are permanently on file at the Triton College Library, Triton College, River Grove, Illinois.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

The major purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of particular educational programs for the Vietnamese refugee based on an in-depth study of one Vietnamese family's ten-year experience. The review of related literature will first examine cultural influences that affected contemporary Vietnamese education, the philosophy and structure of Vietnamese education from 1955 to 1975, and, finally, characteristics of Vietnamese refugee education in the United States from 1975 to 1984. It is necessary to examine these three topics in order to understand the nature of the Vietnamese refugee's transition from one educational system to another.

Chinese Influence on Vietnamese Education

Vietnam was under China's control for almost a thousand years, from roughly the first century B.C. to the early tenth century A.D. when the T'ang dynasty collapsed. Perhaps the greatest influences China had on Vietnamese society in general and Vietnamese education in particular, according to Ellen Hammer in Vietnam: Yesterday and Today,

were the great philosophies and religions of Asia:

"Confucianism and Taoism were spread by the many Chinese scholars who came among them as administrators or as refugees fleeing from civil war in their homeland."¹ Later, Buddhist monks from China as well as Indian merchants spread Buddhism to the Vietnamese. What began in the first century B.C. was the introduction to three of the four major religions that were to remain dominant in Vietnam to the present day: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Christianity was the fourth religion, brought to Vietnam in the early seventeenth century by European priests.

Although all three of the early religions exerted strong influence on the minds of the Vietnamese, it was Confucianism that had the most specific effect on education:

In 1075 the first literacy examinations--the keystone of the Confucianist edifice of government--were held for the recruitment of officials who were to be known by Westerners as mandarins. Of the ten scholars who successfully passed these particular examinations,² the man who came out on top was named prime minister.

It was not birth, money, or political favoritism that placed men in high public office, but success in education. The important role education played in social advancement created a deep-rooted respect, if not reverence, for education that flourished in the Vietnamese mind to the present day. In Between Two Cultures: The Vietnamese in

¹Ellen Hammer, Vietnam: Yesterday and Today (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), p.60.

²Ibid., p. 67.

America, Henkin and Liem Nguyen write:

Every Vietnamese man has a mandarin in his mind; that is, every man wants to become mandarin. Since the first national competitive examinations were administered in 1075, only those who passed the qualifying exams could hope to become mandarins, government officials, or receive other honors.³ Learning was, and still is, highly valued.

Ann Crawford notes, however, that the supposedly democratic system of promoting true scholars to administrative positions despite their family background was, in actuality, more political:

There was interference in the examination process. Numerous references were required from local officials before a person could take the examinations. Persons who were engaged in menial labor, to include shoemakers, actors, etc., plus criminals were excluded from eligibility. In addition, their descendents for three generations were also prohibited from taking the examinations.⁴

Despite the politics and elitism which permeated the examination system and lessened the actual role of education, the reverence for education was still maintained in Vietnamese culture. A Vietnamese scholar, Vuong Thuy, attributes the high esteem for education to the traditional role education has played in facilitating social advancement: " . . . educational achievement measured by examination has been the main criterion for recruitment and

³ Alan B. Henkin and Liem Thanh Nguyen, Between Two Cultures: The Vietnamese in America (Saratoga, Cal.: Century Twenty One Publishing, 1981), p. 15.

⁴ Ann Caddell Crawford, Customs and Culture of Vietnam (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1966), p. 93.

social advancement."⁵ As a result, even in the twentieth century, it is education and not wealth that the people of Vietnam respect. Thuy notes that this respect is carried by all social classes: "The Vietnamese, by and large, have the highest esteem for education whether they are rich or poor, educated or illiterate, urban or rural, sophisticated or unsophisticated."⁶

The Chinese influence on modern Vietnamese education affected not only the national attitude towards education, but, to a large extent, the methodology as well. In Fire in the Lake, Francis Fitzgerald explains the Vietnamese "states of mind," and those historical, social, and political factors which have influenced them. Among the influences, Fitzgerald notes the effect Confucianism had on education, even up to modern times.

In describing an American instructor in Vietnam teaching comparative government, Fitzgerald points out the difficulty the students had because the instructor did not teach them the one true government:

The students could not conceive that government could be a matter of opinion. Either a government had worked or it had not, and if it had not worked, then it was not a proper subject for study. . . .

. . . In trying to teach comparative government, the American professor had, of course, assumed that his Vietnamese students possessed certain analytical tools:

⁵ Vuong Thuy, Getting to Know the Vietnamese and Their Culture (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980), p. 16.

⁶ Ibid.

a conceptual framework, for instance, that allowed them to abstract the idea "government" from all the various instances of government that have existed in the world. In his course he would often be working from the general to the particular by a process of deductive logic. . . . What he did not realize was that his logic was hardly more universal than the forms of government he was discussing, and that most Vietnamese have an entirely different organization of mind.

What the American instructor (like the American government and military personnel) did not understand, according to Fitzgerald, were the basic tenets of Confucian education:

Traditional Vietnamese education accorded with its medium. The child did not learn "principles" from his parents, he learned how to imitate his father in his every action. . . . In his formal education the child encountered not a series of "disciplines" but a vast, unsystematized collection of stories and precepts. In the Confucian texts instructions on how to dress and write poetry were juxtaposed with injunctions to such virtues as patience and humility. Each precept, independently arrived at by a process of induction had its own absolute importance for the proper conduct of life. . . . In reading the Confucian precepts the child arrived not at a theory of behavior⁸ but at a series of clues to the one true way of life.

That twentieth century education in Vietnam could be so significantly shaped by a religion the Chinese brought to the country in the first century B.C. is remarkable and yet as understandable as the effect of Christianity on twentieth century American education.

French Influence on Vietnamese Education

The second major influence on Vietnamese education

⁷ Frances Fitzgerald, Fire in the Lake (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), pp. 23-24.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 24-25.

came from the French. Under French rule from 1861 to 1954, Vietnam was profoundly affected by a country whose culture, religion, and educational system were dramatically different from its own. Preceded by the Portugese who were the first Europeans to come to Vietnam in 1535, the French did not arrive in the country until 1669 (after the Dutch and English had voyaged there as well). In The Smaller Dragon, Joseph Buttinger describes the first visits of the French to Vietnam as being anything but easy:

More unwelcome to their European rivals than to the Vietnamese, the French went to Vietnam at the risk of having their ships sunk by Dutch saboteurs, their agents murdered as a result of Portugese intrigues, and their merchandise as well as their reputation as traders slandered by the English. The French, of course, were ready to fight back.

It is undeniable that the French were tenacious in their dealings with Vietnam, penetrating the cultural fiber of the country, establishing a religion, a language, a writing system, and an educational system that were to remain in the country until modern times.

One of the first and most influential Frenchmen to affect Vietnamese culture and education was Monsignor Alexander of Rhodes from the papal city of Avignon. Joseph Buttinger writes of Rhodes' contributions which were far-reaching and long-lasting:

Only six months after his arrival in Vietnam [Rhodes]

⁹ Joseph Buttinger, The Smaller Dragon: A Political History of Vietnam (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958), pp. 208-209.

had mastered the language and started to preach in Vietnamese. He wrote the first catechism in Vietnamese and also published a Vietnamese-Latin-and-Portuguese dictionary. Moreover, these works were the first to be printed in Quoc Ngu, a truly revolutionary invention, which enabled the Jesuits to write for their converts in Latin letters and freed the Vietnamese themselves from the difficulties of written communication inherent in their ideography derived from the Chinese.

Although the Romanized writing system of Quoc Ngu was the result of efforts by several Portuguese and Italian Jesuits, it was Rhodes who perfected the system and consciously used it as a tool to spread Christianity among a strongly Confucianist society:

According to his own meticulous accounts, [Rhodes] baptized 6,700 persons in less than two years [1627-1629]. He made Catholics of many nobles and even converted a princess and seventeen relatives of the ruling class.

With a workable writing system that was considerably easier to teach and to learn than the complex Chinese ideograms, Rhodes and other missionaries were able to spread the Christian word to both noblemen and the common man alike. Christianity and a workable writing system became inextricably bound in seventeenth century Vietnam, as Christianity and literacy have often been linked in other countries in other centuries.

As profound as the effects of Catholicism and Quoc Ngu were on the Vietnamese culture, neither influence could be linked strictly to the French, for both the Italian and

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 214-215.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 215.

Portugese priests had contributed to the development of Quoc Ngu and the spread of Catholicism in Vietnam. What was specifically French, however, was the introduction of the French language and the dramatic alteration of the traditional Chinese mandarin educational system. These changes would occur as the French gained political control of the Asian country in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The French had been determined to preserve Catholicism in Vietnam. The religious interest together with the possibility of exploiting the country's resources, the competition with Great Britain for colonial holdings, and the invaluable proximity Vietnam held to China, lured the French into conquering Vietnam. The French began their conquest of the south of Vietnam in 1858 by seizing Da Nang in retaliation for the murder of missionaries. Saigon fell to the French in 1861 and by 1887 France's rule extended over Cochinchina, Annam, Tonkin, and Cambodia: "As of 1887, Vietnam had ceased to exist for all practical purposes, except as a memory and a rallying cry to revolt."¹²

Ruling Vietnam meant that the Mandarin system of education and government had to be replaced by a French system. Crawford writes:

In order to participate in the civil service under the French rule, the Vietnamese had to convert to the French system and were required to know the French language.

¹² Hammer, Vietnam: Yesterday and Today, p. 111.

In addition, they had to have a good facility with the new romanized version of their language instead of the traditional Chinese characters which had been in use for hundreds of years.¹³

French influence on education was a slow process at first; the traditional Mandarin system coexisted with the French schools. However, within thirteen year's time, a radical change swept Vietnamese education:

After the beginning of 1900, the whole system was revised. An educational system of three levels was established; elementary, primary, and secondary education (au hoc, tieu hoc, and trung hoc). In addition, the use of Quoc Ngu, the romanized translation of the spoken language, was added to the curriculum. Emphasis was placed on rote memory,¹⁴ class discipline and other French educational methods.

The impact the French made on the Vietnamese educational system has been recognized by many scholars. Thuy, Snyder, and Chompatong have discussed and criticized the elitism which permeated French and, as a result, Vietnamese education, particularly the academic bias of Vietnamese education. Thuy writes:

Vietnamese education has often been criticized for its literary nature, orientation toward examinations, its learning style, lack of diversity in terms of programs of study, the rigidity of its teaching methodology, and for placing too much emphasis on academic orientation instead of the development of individual skills in students.

Furthermore, under French influence, the Vietnamese educational system was generally viewed as serving mainly the elite who could afford it,¹⁵ in terms of economic and academic ability . . .

¹³ Crawford, Customs and Culture of Vietnam, p. 97.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 97-98.

¹⁵ Thuy, Getting to Know the Vietnamese, p. 64.

Snyder similarly notes the academic bias of the Vietnamese system which was established by the French. As a result, Snyder claims that ". . . many students find it difficult to satisfy the requirements of the system, and many more find it impossible to receive the vocational training they desire."¹⁶ Chompatong also criticizes the French influence:

The country has inherited an educational system from the French which is highly centralized and of which the curriculum is subject-centered. Such practical subjects as¹⁷ industrial arts and agriculture are neglected.

In criticizing the subject-centered curriculum inherited from the French, Chompatong also points out how highly centralized the system is. In several guides to U.S. educators, Education in Vietnam: Fundamental Principles and Curricula and Bilingual Instruction and Special English Training: Meet with Vietnamese Students, the centralized nature of Vietnamese education due to French influence has been noted:

Education in Vietnam has considerably been influenced by French education. The educational system is highly centralized. Educational activities throughout the country are directed and controlled by the national Ministry of Education. All secondary and elementary schools, public and private as well, have to apply the same curricula prescribed by the Ministry of Education.¹⁸

¹⁶ Phillip C. Snyder, "South Vietnam: A Challenge for Creativity," Kappa Delta Pi Record 7 (December 1970): 42.

¹⁷ Saiyut Chompatong, "Some Aspects of Education in the Republic of Viet Nam," Contemporary Education 45 (Spring 1974): 190.

¹⁸ Bilingual Instruction and Special English

And in Education in Vietnam, American educators are informed that

Vietnam, like France, had a national education system. Programs of study from pre-school through university, administrative procedures, teacher training and placement were all directed by the Ministry of Education in Saigon.

Another aspect of French education which became apparent in Vietnamese education was the methodology.

Henkin and Liem Nguyen point out that

the general influence of the French educational system remained strong. The dominant instructional approach was the lecture method with a substantial amount of student work performed at home. There were few opportunities for practicum experiences. Learning was heavily dependent upon memorization rather than on reasoning or understanding.

Similarly, Thuy notes the rigid methodology employed in the Vietnamese classroom which was a direct borrowing from the French educational system: "Under the influence of the French culture and educational system, rote learning instead of a problem-solving approach prevailed in Vietnamese schools."²¹ The rigidity of this methodology inhibited analytic or critical thinking, group dynamics, individual

Training: Meet with Vietnamese Students (n.p.: Tucson Public Schools, 1976), p. 15.

¹⁹ Center for Applied Linguistics, Education in Vietnam: Fundamental Principles & Curricula (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1975), p. 3.

²⁰ Henkin and Liem Nguyen, Between Two Cultures, p. 18.

²¹ Thuy, Getting to Know the Vietnamese and Their Culture, p. 71.

exploration, or experimentation, all of which are so important in American schools.

The impact the French had on the Vietnamese educational system permeated a majority, if not all, of the schools in Vietnam after 1900. It is interesting to note that the criticism leveled against Vietnamese education is very often directed at the consequences of French rule and influence. In his article, "Problems in Vietnamese Education," Jack Patt criticized "an educational tradition that has long been dominated by French tradition."²² Specifically, Patt condemned the prevailing use of the French language, French textbooks, and French teachers or Vietnamese teachers enamored of all things French. What resulted was a virtual "freezing" of the Vietnamese vocabulary which was unable to keep pace with the growth of modern technology, and the creation of "a notorious blackmarket in education" where parents made payoffs to get their children enrolled in French-administered schools and paid tutors to drill their children in the French language.²³

In "America's Dien Bien Phu?" John Naisbitt analyzed American educational efforts in Vietnam and described some characteristics of contemporary Vietnamese education. One

²² Jack Patt, "Problems in Vietnamese Education," Journal of General Education 21 (April 1969): 47.

²³ Ibid., p. 48.

of Naisbitt's most piercing criticisms was leveled against the French who transformed a flourishing educational system into a decadent remnant good only for the French elite:

Vietnam once had an educational system that was famous for producing a population that was 80 per cent literate. This system was a native adaptation of the Chinese mandarin system dating back to Peking rule during the first millennium A.D. The French conquest a century ago led to the almost complete destruction of the mandarin system. The new French system centered around a small Gallicized elite that was out of touch with the people. The deterioration was such that, on the eve of World War II, there were more prisons in French Indochina than schools.²⁴

Like Thuy, Snyder, and Chompatong, Naisbitt also attacked the narrowly focused college preparatory curriculum inherited from the French and discussed the resulting lack of available jobs for those who did graduate from college in Vietnam. "A major problem of the South Vietnamese government is how to employ . . . thousands of college graduates without creating even more unproductive government jobs."²⁵

Stanley Karnow, like Naisbitt, wrote of the negative impact the French had on the Vietnamese educational system. Like Naisbitt, Karnow points out that while 80 percent of Vietnam's population was "more or less literate in Chinese ideographs used for written Vietnamese . . . by the eve of World War II, fewer than one fifth of all school-age boys in

²⁴ John Naisbitt, "Education in Vietnam: America's Dien Bien Phu?," Saturday Review, July 15 1967, p. 53.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 55.

Vietnam were attending classes."²⁶ The French lack of consideration for Vietnamese cultural and educational values (e.g., Vietnamese were required to recite, "Nos ancêtres les Galois habitaient jadis la Gaul"), as well as Vietnamese resistance to colonial contamination worked to foster this vast illiteracy. Karnow also discusses the lack of viable employment for college-educated Vietnamese, illustrating how long-term the problem actually was. As early as the 1930's, even Vietnamese youth educated in Paris were scorned back at home by the ruling French. Karnow writes:

A painful experience awaited many young Vietnamese, usually of wealthy origin, who studied in Paris. Having enjoyed the freedom and comradeship of the Latin Quarter, they would return to Vietnam to have their newspapers and books confiscated by the colonial police, who regarded them as potential subversives. They rarely found jobs that equaled their education,²⁷ and they could never match the wages of the French.

This unemployment or underemployment of the educated Vietnamese under French rule has been noted by Frances Fitzgerald as well: ". . . the new students grew up on a dangerous blend of modern Western education and Vietnamese tradition . . . the Western-educated students were few in number, but by the 1930's there were still too many of them to fill the available jobs."²⁸ College graduates unable to find employment is an all too familiar world-wide scenario

²⁶ Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History, (New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 115.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Fitzgerald, Fire in the Lake, p. 82.

in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet, the situation in Vietnam was more complex due to a history of foreign occupation and exploitation.

The net effect of French rule on the Vietnamese educational system was undoubtedly negative. Bringing to the Vietnamese the French language, a Romanized writing system, and Catholicism, the French also imposed a French structure, rote learning, a subject-centered curriculum, a college preparatory orientation, the lecture method, and a virtual avoidance of Vietnamese historical and cultural studies on a once-vital and successful Vietnamese educational system. Furthermore, those Vietnamese who did bend to accept the French system were surprised, upon graduation from the university, to find themselves without a suitable job or without a job at all in their own homeland.

Vietnamese Education: 1955-1975

On May 7, 1954, the French, who had occupied Vietnam since 1861, were defeated at Dien Bien Phu. In July, agreements were reached in Geneva, Switzerland, to establish a provisional demarcation line at the seventeenth parallel pending settlement through national elections. A year later a new school system was established, which still maintained a great deal of French influence; however, ". . . while the North emphasized a study of Marxist doctrine, the South

emphasized the study of nationalism."²⁹ Most of the literature available in the United States on Vietnamese education after 1955 is, for obvious reasons, limited almost entirely to information on South Vietnam. Therefore, the analysis which follows will be concerned primarily with the educational system of the South.

Three significant changes occurred within the Vietnamese educational system after the French were defeated. First, the French language was replaced by Vietnamese as the language of instruction. Secondly, the University of Saigon was founded in 1956. Finally, the number of French-administered and taught schools was gradually reduced and replaced by Vietnamese-run schools.

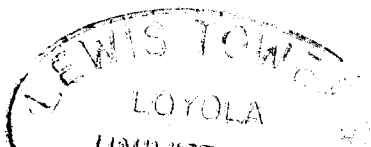
Vuong Thuy claimed:

Education in Vietnam [since 1954] flourished at a very impressive pace, involving the large majority of the population. Illiteracy was attacked at its root. Tremendous efforts and great achievements were made in many areas of education such as teacher training, translation of foreign textbooks into Vietnamese, and development of curricula.

Despite Thuy's enthusiasm for the rebirth of education in Vietnam after the French defeat, a 1960 study done by a team of educators from Southern Illinois University found elementary education programs in South Vietnam to be "overcrowded, understaffed, inadequately

²⁹ Crawford, Customs and Culture of Vietnam, p. 98.

³⁰ Thuy, Getting to Know the Vietnamese and Their Culture, p. 62.



supported with teaching materials"; they found elementary teacher status to be "extremely low"; and they surmised that "the chief aim of the total program of education was to produce an educated elite who would administer the country and lead the majority of the people."³¹ Vestiges of French influence were readily apparent despite Vietnamese efforts to reform education. Quite naturally, change was not immediate or comprehensive.

Yet, a moderate renaissance in education could have occurred in Vietnam after the French withdrawal had it not been for the war. A renewed sense of nationalism surged through the people, rekindling an open approval of all things Vietnamese. Such thinking was apparent in the official philosophical statement issued in 1960. In Elementary Education Curriculum (Department of National Education, Saigon, 1960), the following fundamental principles of education were professed:

- A) Education in Vietnam must be a humanist education, respecting the sacred character of the human being, regarding man as an end in himself, and aiming at the full development of man.
- B) Education in Vietnam must be a national education, respecting the traditional values, assuring the continuity of man with his natural environment (his family, profession and country), aiming at safeguarding the nation, its prosperity and the collective promotion of its people.
- C) Education in Vietnam must be an open education, respecting the scientific mind as a factor of

³¹ Arthur Aikman, "Progress in Education: Vietnam," Peabody Journal of Education 48 (October 1970): 76-80.

progress, attempting to develop the social and democratic spirit, and welcoming all the authentic cultural values of the world.³²

These principles, although directly related to primary education, were, nonetheless, reflective of secondary education as well. Concern for the "sacred character of the human being," promotion of "safeguarding the nation," and respect for "the social and democratic spirit" attested to the deep-rooted Vietnamese love of country, which was once again free to flourish. The products of this education would reflect this nationalism many years later as refugees in a country far from their home.

Education in Vietnam was compulsory for all children for five years of primary school. Primary education was free, and children were to begin school at age five, although by no means were five years of free, compulsory education possible for many Vietnamese children. In 1962, American advisors were increased to 12,000 and by 1963 South Vietnamese troops were clashing with Buddhist demonstrators. A year later the Maddox, an American destroyer, was attacked in the Tonkin Gulf by North Vietnamese troops, and American military retaliation commenced in February of 1965. Many Vietnamese children were raised amidst violence, devastation, and the unspeakable horror of war. Ann

³²Elementary Education Curriculum, Department of National Education, Saigon, quoted in Center for Applied Linguistics, Education in Vietnam: Fundamental Principles and Curricula, p. 5.

Crawford wrote of some of the effects of war on school children in Customs and Culture of Vietnam, by describing intimidation acts of the Viet Cong:

The Viet Cong will often stop a bus load of children and tell them that if they see them on the bus going to school again, they will cut off one of their hands or make them deaf. After a few days, the students will usually go back to school. The Viet Cong have frequently made their promise good by stopping the bus again, hacking off hands, or ramming a piece of bamboo into their ears to rupture the eardrums.³³

Elementary school children were not the only age group to suffer in Vietnam. In Detailed Content of Vietnamese Secondary Education, the authors describe the effects of war on secondary school students, teachers, and families:

The impact of war was tremendous on the whole educational system, especially on the high school level. Good teachers were drafted into the armed forces. After military training, some were allowed to return to teach in their former schools, but remained as armed forces reserves. Many families moved to big cities to avoid war consequences, so there was a shortage of classrooms. Some elementary schools ran three shifts (7:30-11:00 a.m., 11:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m., 2:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m.), but most high schools had only two shifts--7:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. and 1:00 p.m.-6:00 p.m. There were five sessions a day, six days a week; one textbook for each subject was used in each grade.³⁴

Interruptions in the continuity of the teaching staff, scheduling, and available materials were minor disturbances compared with the psychological shock some students and

³³ Crawford, Customs and Culture of Vietnam, pp. 91-92.

³⁴ Center for Applied Linguistics, Detailed Content of the Vietnamese Secondary Curriculum (Arlington, Va.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1976), p. 2.

educators endured.

In "South Vietnam: A Challenge for Creativity"

Phillip Snyder recounts the Herculean efforts of one secondary school principal to maintain his school despite the ravages of war:

Recently, the principal of the Goi Hoi Secondary School in Hue, fifty miles from the demilitarized zone, found it necessary to fortify a tunnel under his bedroom and hide his wife and children each evening, after which he would join the other community leaders in a specially constructed stockade to wait out the night. Immediately following the "Tet" offensive he found himself faced with a problem of two hundred graves located in and around his school building. The Viet Cong had used the school site for a systematic elimination of local government representatives. Ever since, the entire community has lived and worked under the constant intimidation of this ever-present menace. At the same time, this man strived to formulate building specifications and develop new courses of study for his afflicted school. Student organizations and school leaders joined to repair damages and install facilities in an attempt to continue classes. As a result, classes started and within months, the school was in the process of expanding its curriculum in an effort to provide ³⁵ vocationally-oriented classes to its needy students.

In spite of war, education continued to operate in Vietnam throughout the 1960's and 1970's, and although many children had their compulsory elementary schooling interrupted or stopped completely, many others continued on to a secondary school, in large part due to the efforts of their parents and educators like the principal at the Goi Hoi Secondary School.

In Vietnam there are both public and private

³⁵ Snyder, "South Vietnam: A Challenge for Creativity," p. 42.

secondary schools. Admission to the public schools is considerably more difficult as students must pass a competitive exam given yearly by the individual school. However, admission to the public high school is also more desirable. Both Berry Morton in "Education in Vietnam" and Vuong Thuy in Getting to Know the Vietnamese and Their Culture have discussed the popularity of public over private high schools in Vietnam. First, the public schools were free of charge, being supported and run by the government, while the private schools charged expensive tuitions. Secondly, the public schools attracted a larger number of qualified teachers. Thirdly, advancements were made in curricular offerings at the public schools so that "newer" subjects such as laboratory science, home economics, business education, industrial arts, sports, music, and arts activities were offered. Further, the public schools, by and large, had better equipment, facilities, and a higher standard of instruction than the private schools had. Finally, the newly developed pride in all things Vietnamese led parents to choose the Vietnamese-run public schools over the private institutions.³⁶

Secondary education in Vietnam consists of two cycles, the first of which spans four years and the second of which spans three years. Throughout the first cycle

³⁶ Berry Morton, "Education in Vietnam," Contemporary Education 45 (Spring 1974): 205; Thuy, Getting to Know the Vietnamese and Their Culture, p. 63.

students are presented with a general liberal arts program of study. Subjects in the first year of the first cycle include the following: Vietnamese language, history, geography, civic education, foreign languages, physics, chemistry, mathematics, natural sciences, physical education, drawing, handicraft, home economics, and music.³⁷

A closer look at the topics discussed under each subject reveals that the Vietnamese general education curriculum was quite similar to general education curricula taught in many countries, including the United States. Physics classes, for example, included study of weights, measurement, equilibrium, direction and magnitude, addition of two vectors, and balance. A subject that bears mention due to its unique nature is civics education. For one hour per week, students were taught "economizing money and material things, kind treatment to animals, duty towards oneself, one's body, feeling, and intellect . . . gratitude to the ancestors, mutual affection among family members . . . and traffic regulations."³⁸ The topics in civic education class, though appearing eclectic to an American, represented important cultural mores to the Vietnamese.

In the second cycle, lasting three years, the Vietnamese student was made to choose one of four areas of

³⁷ Center for Applied Linguistics, Detailed Content, p. 4.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

study: a) experimental science, b) science and mathematics, c) modern literature, or d) classical literature. These tracks reflect the emphasis placed on purely academic subject areas, for "the main purpose of the secondary school is to prepare students for higher education."³⁹ This specialization and in-depth study in a particular academic area is similar to the European system of secondary education, reflective of an elitist bias in education.

Upon completion of three years of the second cycle of secondary education, after having attended school for 25-28 hours per week, Vietnamese students took the baccalaureate examination in order to be awarded the secondary school diploma (the Tu Tai) and qualify for admission to the university. Prior to 1972, there were two baccalaureate exams to take: the Tu Tai I after the first cycle, which determined which students would proceed to the second cycle of secondary education, and the Tu Tai II, taken at the end of the second cycle. In 1972, the Tu Tai I was discarded in an effort to make Vietnamese education more democratic and less restrictive. Even with the elimination of the first Tu Tai exam, Vietnamese students were still under a great deal of stress to pass the one Tu Tai at the end of their secondary schooling:

This exam, which lasted for many days, was usually difficult and demanding. Many students failed each year. However, they were allowed to take the exam again

³⁹ Bilingual Instruction, p. 16.

and again until they passed. Quite a few students had to repeat it for several years before they passed it.⁴⁰

If secondary school placed a great deal of emphasis on examinations, it did so in order to prepare students for what was to come at the university level. At the university, exams were given at the end of each year to determine whether students would proceed on to the next year. A student failing an exam in one subject would fail the entire year's work and have to repeat all subjects of study. It is almost an understatement to write, as Crawford has, that "examinations assume great importance in the Vietnamese educational system."⁴¹

As of 1975, there were four public universities in Vietnam: the University of Saigon, the University of Hue, the University of Can Tho, and the Duc Polytechnic University. In addition to the four public institutions, there were five private universities: the University of Dalat, a Catholic institution; the Buddhist University; the University at Tay Ninh, run by the Cao Dai religious sect; the University in Long Xuyen, founded by the Hao Hao religious sect; and the privately founded Peace University, located at Vung Tao.⁴²

The University of Saigon, founded in 1956, was the

⁴⁰ Thuy, Getting to Know the Vietnamese and Their Culture, p. 68.

⁴¹ Crawford, Customs and Culture of Vietnam, p. 101.

⁴² Morton, "Education in Vietnam," p. 206.

nation's first and subsequently largest university, enrolling 64,000 students and employing 750 professors as of 1974.⁴³ Morton described the University of Saigon as not having a campus per se, but comprised of various buildings scattered through Saigon and the surrounding areas. Although the most prestigious of all universities, it suffered from such a lack of classroom space that many students were simply unable to attend classes and were forced to purchase the professors' notes and study at home in order to prepare for the qualifying exams.

Like public secondary schools in Vietnam, public universities were free; moreover, students were awarded a small stipend if they were preparing for work in the civil service structure. There were nine faculties of study at the University of Saigon: law, literature, pedagogy, medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, letters, science, and architecture. Enrollments were highest in the law faculty, according to Crawford.⁴⁴ Generally, enrollments at the universities surged from the time they were founded in the mid-1950's until the mid-1970's. This was due not only to the great respect and desire for education which Vietnamese harbored, but also to the war: "Saigon youths enrolled in schools to avoid the draft . . ."⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Crawford, Customs and Culture of Vietnam, p. 101.

⁴⁵ Naisbitt, "America's Dien Bien Phu?," p. 54.

One consequence of the swelling enrollments at the universities in Vietnam in the 1970's was the growing ratio of students to professors. According to Morton, in 1974 there were fifty students per one professor. The matter was complicated by the fact that a full-time professor at the University of Saigon had to teach only three clock hours per week. The amount of time required in the classroom, coupled with a professor's salary--approximately sixty dollars a month, led to the "suitcase-" or "flying professor" phenomenon. As Morton described it:

Classes are so scheduled that a professor might teach three hours on Monday morning, he might then fly to Hue and then teach six hours on Tuesday and six hours on Wednesday, he might then fly to Can Tho on Thursday and teach six hours on Friday and six hours on Saturday, and on Sunday he might fly back to Saigon to be ready for his Monday class at the University. The next week he might repeat the same itinerary ⁴⁶ or teach several days at a fourth and a fifth university.

A hectic schedule, to be sure, but worth the professor's while, as a salary could be increased in this fashion from sixty dollars a month to three hundred dollars.

Many Vietnamese university professors received part or all of their training in the United States, Australia, Canada, France, Great Britain, or Germany. As a result,

the impact of their Western training is now being felt in the areas of administration, curriculum, course-credit systems, modern objective-type examinations, class schedules, laboratory science, and the development of graduate education. ⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Morton, "Education in Vietnam," p. 207.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Despite some Westernization, Vietnamese education differed dramatically from American education in curriculum, methodology, and the roles students, teachers, and parents played in the educational process.

In Vietnamese Themes: Understanding Educational Differences Between Americans and Vietnamese, Kim Hong Nguyen wrote of some of the curricular differences between the two systems. In the United States, while the curriculum is flexible and designed for the specific needs of a given population, allowing an elective system to operate fully, in Vietnam,

the curriculum is designed by the Ministry of Education. One curriculum is uniformly applied to every student in the whole country. Electives were introduced as an idea but the system was not successful due⁴⁸ to a lack of trained teachers and administrators.

In addition to the Vietnamese curriculum being more rigid and uniform than that in the United States, the Vietnamese curriculum did not offer any sex education classes and extra-curricular activities such as physical education, home economics, music, and art were given little attention in comparison to their role in the United States' educational system.

Methods of teaching differed significantly as well.

As has been discussed in the section on French influence, the Vietnamese employed a strict lecture method, requiring

⁴⁸Kim Hong Nguyen, Vietnamese Themes: Understanding Educational Differences Between American and Vietnamese, (New York: Office of Bilingual Education, 1976), p. 1.

students to take notes, memorize, and recite. There was little allowance for group discussion, critical exploration, experimentation, and unrestrained inquiry. Vuong Thuy attributed this teaching and learning style to French influence, but Thuy also recognized two other possible explanations for the prevalence of learning by observation rather than by discovery or experimentation:

One of the main reasons for this practice was an acute lack of laboratory facilities. Many schools did not have these facilities, especially private schools. Learning by observation, however, might also have something to do with the influence of Taoism, which discourages any disturbance of harmony between man and nature, and scientific experimentation or discover may lead to this disturbance.

The role of the teacher, student, and parent in Vietnam differed from the role of their counterparts in America. Kim Hong Nguyen noted that "teachers have considerable authority"⁵⁰ and Thuy wrote that "the Vietnamese teacher traditionally enjoyed great respect not only from his students but from everybody, including the students' parents."⁵¹ The Vietnamese teacher's complete authority was pointed out by Huu Phuoc Nguyen as well, who wrote that "the teacher is highly regarded . . . has complete authority . . . and initiates all activities in the

⁴⁹ Thuy, Getting to Know the Vietnamese and Their Culture, p. 71.

⁵⁰ Kim Nguyen, Vietnamese Themes, p. 6.

⁵¹ Thuy, Getting to Know the Vietnamese and Their Culture, p. 77.

classroom."⁵² In Vietnam the teacher need not hold office hours, and contact with students outside the classroom was virtually non-existent. However, in the classroom, the teacher was not only an academic educator but a "spiritual father," setting a moral example for students as well as an intellectual one.

As a result of the teacher's authority, the Vietnamese student's role was considerably more passive than that of the average American student. They described how obedient a majority of the Vietnamese students were towards their instructors:

When the teacher stepped in, all students stood up and kept silent to greet him and at the same time show him respect. They only sat down when the teacher gave them a signal, either orally or by a wave of hand, to do so. . . . In the classroom they were expected to keep quiet throughout the period so that work could be done without interference. Talking among students was not allowed and neither was moving around or changing seats unless the teacher gave permission. By and large, Vietnamese students were well behaved since discipline was not only very strict but also very strictly enforced.⁵³

The student had little opportunity to misbehave in the Vietnamese school, but if he did, physical punishment was not out of the question. Further, as Kim Hong Nguyen pointed out, "if a student is expelled, it is impossible to

⁵² Huu Phuoc Nguyen, Outline of Differences in Value Orientation Between the American and Vietnamese People and Possible Problems for Vietnamese Students in American Schools (n.p.: California State Department of Education, 1975), p. 4.

⁵³ Kim Nguyen, Vietnamese Themes, p. 6.

enter another public school."⁵⁴

Pressure on Vietnamese students to be obedient and to do well in their studies came, not only from their instructors, but more importantly and fundamentally from their parents and families. N.H. Chi, in "Vietnam: The Culture of War," wrote: "As the future of the family, children--especially of middle-class and upper-class families--are constantly pushed to attain their highest achievements at school."⁵⁵ And Marjorie Kitano, in "Early Education for Asian American Children," described Vietnamese children as

willing students, due possibly to the culture's respect for education and educators. Children's roles in relation to parents are characterized by obedience,⁵⁶ and the teacher's status supercedes that of the father.

Responding only when called upon, the Vietnamese would not volunteer information, ask a question, or ever criticize a teacher in class, even if the student were bursting with ideas, questions, or criticisms. Not only would such behavior be culturally disapproved, it would be a violation of fundamental philosophical beliefs as well.

As students respected their parents and teachers,

⁵⁴ Kim Nguyen, Vietnamese Themes, p. 6.

⁵⁵ N. H. Chi, "Vietnam: The Culture of War," in Southeast Asian Exodus: From Tradition to Resettlement, ed. Elliot L. Tepper (Ottawa, Canada: The Canadian-Asian Studies Association, 1980), p. 29.

⁵⁶ Marorie Kitano, "Early Education for Asian American Children," Young Children, January 1980, p. 16.

the Vietnamese parent respected the Vietnamese teacher: The traditional attitude of parents toward the teacher was always that of respect. In Vietnamese culture, parents rarely or never questioned the knowledge of the teacher.⁵⁷ Education was not only highly regarded for its own sake, but it was viewed as a means to social advancement and a better life. It is important to note that a good life in Vietnamese culture did not necessarily mean one filled with material wealth, for a wealthy man with little education commanded less respect than a poorer man with a good education. Therefore, parents, particularly those who were well-educated themselves, spent a great deal of time and money helping their children with their schooling and hiring tutors to guide them. However, Thuy and Huu Phuoc Nguyen both pointed out that despite parental interest in education, Vietnamese parents did not actively participate in school activities or the process and functioning of the school.⁵⁸ There were Parent Associations, though they were not very active, and there were no Parent-Teacher Associations at all. Again, this was in great part due to parental respect for teachers and for their authority over students and the operation of the learning process.

From 1955 to 1975 the literature on Vietnamese

⁵⁷ Thuy, Getting to Know the Vietnamese and Their Culture, p. 79.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 80; Huu Nguyen, Outline of Differences in Value Orientation, p. 4.

education revealed the growth of a national educational system. Vietnamese-run schools prospered for a short time, the Vietnamese language replaced French as the language of instruction, and the University of Saigon was founded. With a new pride in all things Vietnamese, enrollments in the public schools swelled at all levels, from the elementary schools to the universities. In an effort to make education less elitist, the Tu Tai I examination was dropped from the secondary school curriculum in 1971. Parents who could afford it hired tutors for their children so that they could meet their futures armed with the best education possible. Despite gains in Vietnamese education after the French withdrawal, it was not long before war, once again, consumed the lives of the Vietnamese. Education, like all other aspects of life, was bound to be affected.

Vietnamese Refugee Education in the United States: 1975-1984

In April, 1975, the South Vietnamese government collapsed. Confusion, hysteria, and fear swept through the Vietnamese people, especially through those who had actively supported that government. Refugees fled Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, arriving in a state of shock and depression in those countries that opened their doors to them: the United States, France, Canada, Australia, and Great Britain. In the United States, government officials, social workers, health personnel, educators, and laypeople, concerned with the welfare of the refugee, not only provided them with

housing, food, medicine, and education, but studied the progress of the Vietnamese refugee as well. It is the intent here to review the studies done on the Vietnamese refugee's educational experience in the United States from the time of their arrival in the Spring of 1975 until the present.

The Vietnamese refugee had an advantage that past Asian refugees lacked: the benefit of legislation which facilitated the educational process for them. In a study on the "Past and Present School System Response to Asian Immigrants," Harriet Tamminga enumerated the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Supreme Court Lau decision, which mandated schools to provide special help for non-English-speaking children, and civil rights demands for curricula relevant to minority children. Unlike their Chinese and Japanese predecessors, who received few, if any, remedial and special programs to offset their unique linguistic and cultural needs, the Vietnamese were the beneficiaries of a more enlightened, more humanistic, less chauvinistic educational system:

Cultural pluralism has been incorporated in school ideology, along with the idea of acculturation. School systems today are expected to provide instrumental socialization to facilitate equal opportunity for full participation in American society by offering bilingual or English as a Second Language instruction to linguistically different pupils. Also, schools are expected to provide expressive socialization to enhance ethnic identity through ethnic studies and other

curriculum reforms.⁵⁹

Undoubtedly the United States had had experience in dealing with both immigrant and refugee population before the Vietnamese. Similarly, the Vietnamese had experienced the acculturation process three times in their own homeland under Chinese, French, and American influence. Oggeri, the daughter of Dr. Tran Van Chuong, previous Ambassador of South Vietnam to the United States, completed one of the few qualitative studies on the Vietnamese refugee in the U.S. She analyzed government documents, dissertations, reports of research in books and articles, and novels to address cultural problems that affected the Vietnamese process of adjustment, strategies that could be employed, the acculturation process of past immigrant groups, and the Vietnamese acculturation process under occupation of their country by the Chinese, French, and Americans. Oggeri's findings indicate that Vietnamese qualities of self-effacement, pragmatism, respect for education, and high achievement orientation have facilitated their acculturation process. On the other hand,

from experience with the Chinese adjustment to American society it could be deduced, however, that due to similar physical characteristics, the Vietnamese might not be integrated in the American society, even though they become highly acculturated. They might, like the Chinese, be victims of subtle or overt discrimination

⁵⁹ Harriet L. Tammings, "Past and Present School System Response to Asian Immigrants," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Chicago, 5 September 1977, p. 33.

and they might resent it.⁶⁰

However, Oggeri's research, like Tamminga's, indicates that legislation would aid the Vietnamese in the acculturation process.

In another study of cultural values affecting the adjustment of Southeast Asian refugees, Penny Van Esternik examined the acculturation process of refugees who must bring with them a world view which is shaped by their native culture. In the field of education, much anxiety can result in the refugee from unstructured or ambiguous role definitions:

This anxiety arises from not knowing where others fit or where they themselves fit in a complex of fixed, stationary positions. A teacher who acts like a teacher provides cues for the student, who then acts like a student. A teacher who acts like a buddy leaves a refugee child wondering what behavior is expected of him or her. Students may expect to be told what to memorize, and if any interpretation is necessary, it is the teacher's interpretation that is the authority. Our school systems have different expectations about the learning process, which refugee children may not easily understand.⁶¹

What will often happen is an outward adjustment by the refugee which occurs long before he or she understands or

⁶⁰ Lechi Tran Oggeri, "The Unique Characteristics of the Vietnamese Culture that Affect the Process of Adjustment of Vietnamese Refugees to American Culture" (Ph.D. dissertation, North Carolina State University, 1979), pp. 166-167.

⁶¹ Penny Van Esternik, "Cultural Factors Affecting the Adjustment of Southeast Asian Refugees," in Southeast Asian Exodus: From Tradition to Resettlement, ed. Elliot L. Tepper (Ottawa, Canada: The Canadian-Asian Studies Association, 1980), p. 169.

truly learns the new cultural patterns.

In some instances, particularly in those involving the adult refugee learner, even an outward appearance of adjustment or acculturation in the American classroom does not occur. Roberta Boss explored the influence of cultural values on the classroom experience of adult Vietnamese students and discovered that they showed little if any initiative or interaction with each other, that options confused them, and that group activities were shunned. Boss concluded that such behavior was the result of Asian cultural influences in conflict with American cultural values:

In our society, students are to take the initiative often, to engage in class discussions and activities, to actively compete against their classmates and against their own past performance. All of these behaviors run counter to the ⁶²Vietnamese student's "natural" inclinations.

Here again, cultural influence dominates the learning process, and the domination is particularly strong in adults who have been exposed to those influences longer than younger learners.

In her study of adult refugee education at Fort Indian Town Gap, Pennsylvania, Gail Kelly analyzed the formal instruction, the materials, and the classroom behavior in the English language classes. She discovered

⁶²Roberta Boss, "The Influence of Cultural Values on Classroom Behaviors of Adult Vietnamese Refugees," paper presented at the Lifelong Learning Research Conference, College Park, Md., 17 February 1983, p. 26.

that the English courses taught American cultural norms despite the claim by educators and camp administrators that refugee education at the camp was designed to preserve Vietnamese values and pride. The lessons, for example, reinforced patriarchal values by completely removing Vietnamese women from the workforce. Kelly claimed, however, that in many middle and lower class Vietnamese families, women were often very much a part of the workforce. Criticizing the lack of cultural sensitivity in the camps, Kelly asked, "if Vietnamese had no hand in designing the course, how could it possibly have stood as the guardian of Vietnamese cultural norms as school authorities claimed it was?"⁶³ She concluded by stating that: "Clearly immigrants need not adopt all aspects of American life in order to live and work in this country and allowing Vietnamese participation in curriculum development may well have produced a different type of instructional program more suitable to cultural and material survival."⁶⁴

Not allowing the Vietnamese to participate in curriculum development was a problem for American educators but more fundamental was the problem of finding the funds, people, and material to teach any courses at all. According to Marianne McCarthy, not only English language classes, but

⁶³Gail Paradise Kelly, "Adult Education for Vietnamese Refugees: Commentary on Pluralism in America," Journal of Ethnic Studies 5 (Winter 1978): 58.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 63.

classes in driver's education, money management, consumer information, high school completion, and college preparation were all needed. Written the year after the Vietnamese began arriving in the United States, McCarthy's article, "Continuing Education for the Vietnamese: A New Challenge," addressed the educational needs of the adult refugee. McCarthy was aware of the fact that most Vietnamese were grossly underemployed in the United States. The plight of many educated adult Vietnamese refugees was similar to that of the one refugee McCarthy quoted:

"It is not the custodial work that disturbs me," said the fiftyish former professor of philosophy, "it is that I often cannot understand or articulate a few small phrases in good English. Even if I use the English I have learned since I arrived here three and a half months ago, nobody seems to know what I am saying."⁶⁵

McCarthy suggested that the only way to remedy such situations was to offer English language courses and specifically courses for various proficiency levels. Those, coupled with American survival skills, would be the fastest way to raise the refugee from his underemployment.

Employment of the Vietnamese refugee often meant part-time employment or underemployment for both men and women, despite the fact that many had held advanced degrees and rather prestigious positions in Vietnam. In a 1982 study done in Los Angeles and Orange Counties, Thi Anh

⁶⁵ Marianne McCarthy, "Continuing Education for the Vietnamese: A New Challenge," Adult Leadership 24 (March 1976): 229.

Nguyen surveyed a random sample of 250 Vietnamese who were employed. Thi Nguyen found that the majority of respondents were employed in occupations other than those for which they were trained. Contrary to McCarthy's contention that inferior English language skills directly related to poor job placement, Thi Nguyen found that the ability to speak English was unrelated to employment for men.⁶⁶

Another study on Vietnamese refugee employment and education, conducted in 1982, surveyed 73 refugee respondents in San Diego, asking them to describe past educational and professional experience and their current (1982) work or professional situations in the United States. From the results of the survey, the conclusion was drawn that, despite unparalleled educational and financial aid since their immigration to the United States in 1975, "the refugee as a worker is having to join the American work force as an American youth would. That is to say, he must start at the bottom of the ladder."⁶⁷

Not only the Vietnamese adult, but the Vietnamese child as well had to be educated after arriving in the United States. Refugee children's education posed a set of

⁶⁶ Thi Anh Nguyen, "Occupational Adjustment of Vietnamese Refugees in Los Angeles and Orange Counties: Education and Jobs" (Ed.D. dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 1982).

⁶⁷ James Harlow, A Survey of Vietnamese Refugee Location in the U.S. Work Force (Los Angeles: ERIC, 1982), p. 11.

problems distinctly different from those of the adult refugee. Some extremely fundamental issues affected the learning process for them. Eileen Ronan reports that her Vietnamese students were apprehensive about the English language, finding the words "horrifyingly long," and that some of her students found it difficult to attend school because they were not used to the cold weather.⁶⁸

Many American schools were simply unprepared for the Vietnamese refugee; others were unwilling to do anything for them once the refugees were firmly and unmistakably present in their schools. In Today's Education, John Koster wrote of his experience tutoring Vietnamese refugees and described a New Jersey school system's response to them:

The schools were no more prepared for the refugees, it seems, than the refugees were for the schools. After finding out that the youngsters I tutored couldn't really cope with English or U.S. history with only six weeks of English instruction, the powers-that-be dumped them in study hall or suggested that they study crafts.⁶⁹

When Koster's Vietnamese students were finally discovered by a school counselor, who put them into a remedial English course and taught them American cultural mores along with English grammar, the students again became frustrated due to her lack of knowledge of Vietnam. One student said, "she

⁶⁸ Eileen Ronan, "Lessons from Students -- Vietnamese, This Time," Journal of Reading 20 (April 1977): 564.

⁶⁹ John Koster, "Tutoring Vietnamese Refugees," Today's Education 66 (November-December 1977): pp. 33-34.

always talk about Japan, never about Vietnam. I know my country is small and weak, but if she is a gentleman, she not say so."⁷⁰ The counselor, having once spent two weeks in Japan, was not quite satisfying the cultural needs of her Vietnamese students. yet the confusion of Asian people and cultures is not at all uncommon for Americans. In all fairness, a similar confusion of Western peoples and cultures occurs for many Asians; Americans do not hold a monopoly on cultural insensitivity.

The cavalier attitude of many American school officials towards the Vietnamese refugee student was made apparent in Ellen Matthew's book, Culture Clash. A personal account of one family's sponsorship of a Vietnamese family from 1975-1979, Culture Clash portrays the difficulties that one family encountered in working with American schools:

The school officials had been anything but receptive about taking them. Oh yes, they said, they would devise a program, they would call us back as soon as the rush of the first few days was over . . . but they never called.⁷¹

Matthews and her husband spent a good deal of time tutoring the refugees they were sponsoring themselves. Undoubtedly, despite the American host family's dismay, the sponsorship program was designed precisely for that individual contact, teaching, and learning.

Being unprepared and sometimes unwilling to aid the

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

⁷¹ Matthews, Culture Clash, p. 37.

Vietnamese refugee student was unenlightened, yet the country was in deep recession in 1975 and school funding would be bound to address American students' needs before those of a refugee population. What further complicated the situation was the widespread dispersal of the Vietnamese refugees. Linda Gordon, Chief Data Analyst in the Office of Refugee Resettlement, wrote:

When the first wave of 130,000 refugees from Southeast Asia entered the United States in 1975, an effort was made to encourage them to disperse widely about the country. The current pattern of residence of Southeast Asians, with persons in each of the fifty states, attests to the success of this effort.⁷²

The intent of the dispersal was to spread the burden of supporting the refugees somewhat equally among the various regions of the United States. No one state or its school districts would be forced to accommodate vast numbers of Vietnamese. On the other hand, Burmark and Kim have pointed out how the dispersal left many schools with only two or three Vietnamese children enrolled in them.⁷³ Either the specially trained bilingual teachers or the Vietnamese students had to be transported from one school to another to meet their needs. Valuable time was lost either way. Unable to claim a sizable number of refugee students, many

⁷²Linda Gordon, "Southeast Asian Refugees in the United States: Dispersal and Concentration," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southwest Social Science Association, San Antonio, Tex., 17 March 1982, p. 1.

⁷³Burmark and Kim, "The Challenge of Educating Vietnamese Children in American Schools," p. 3.

American schools were faced with the dilemma of having to educate the refugee students without the economic or personnel support necessary.

Vietnamese children enrolled in the American school system became a fertile topic of research for educators. Several studies of Vietnamese students' self concept were completed. One investigation examined the levels of self-concept and creative thinking abilities of Vietnamese refugee kindergarten students. It was found that there was a significant correlation between self-concept and fluency of creative thinking and that participation in a bilingual program had a positive effect on Vietnamese children's self-concepts.⁷⁴ In a second study investigating the link between self-concept and reading achievement of Vietnamese refugee students at the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade level, Ngoc Thai found that as reading ability in English increased, self-concept improved.⁷⁵

In other studies of Vietnamese children's adjustment and assimilation into American life, Nadiya Castro found that eight to twelve-year-old Vietnamese children adjust holistically rather than analytically and that their

⁷⁴ Felicidad R. Curva, "Self-Concept and Creative Thinking of Asian-American Kindergarten Children" (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1983).

⁷⁵ Ngoc Thai, "The Relationship of Reading Achievement and the Self-Concept of Vietnamese Refugee Students" (Ph. D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1982).

relationships with American children are less inhibited than relationships between adult refugees and Americans.⁷⁶

Assimilation and cultural conflicts were further analyzed by Arthur Ellis who found that key elements of the environment in Vietnam, conditions surrounding a refugee's departure, time spent in refugee camps, and resettlement in the United States all affected the assimilation and acculturation process of Vietnamese children.⁷⁷

In two studies, the parents of the Vietnamese refugee children were surveyed and interviewed to discover their opinions of the American school system's operation. In a 1980 study, Alan Cameron discovered that 40% of the 44 families he questioned were dissatisfied with their child's academic performance and that 20% felt their children were placed in the wrong grade. Cameron concluded that better communication between refugee parents and American teachers was needed.⁷⁸ How effective the existing support systems for refugee children were was studied in 1983. Mary Prickett found that in three California counties, school

⁷⁶Nadiya A. Castro, "Cultural Change and the Process of Adjustment: A Study of the Adjustment of Vietnamese Refugee Children Who Attend Public Schools" (Ph.D. dissertation, Arizona State University, 1983).

⁷⁷Arthur A. Ellis, The Assimilation and Acculturation of Indochinese Children Into American Culture, (Sacramento, Cal.: Office of Refugee Services, 1980).

⁷⁸Alan S. Cameron, "A Questionnaire Approach to Improving Communication Between Teachers and the of Indochinese Refugee Schoolchildren" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oregon, 1980).

officials had limited knowledge of what services were available for refugees, that many problems were being solved by members of the Vietnamese community themselves, and that the refugees perceived reception and placement services as most valuable, psychiatric counselling as least valuable. Prickett concluded that a support program, involving the refugees and school personnel, with a goal of developing self-reliance among refugees, would be the most desirable program to run.⁷⁹

An early but comprehensive and qualitative study of the Vietnamese refugee was completed by Gail Kelly in 1977. In her book, From Vietnam to America: A Chronicle of the Vietnamese Immigration to the United States, Kelly described the refugee's departure from Vietnam and entrance into the American lower classes two years later. She discussed education in the refugee camps, primarily that at Fort Indian Town Gap, concluding that the camp education programs were designed to prepare Vietnamese to live in America. The

programs existed to get Vietnamese used to the idea that they were going to remain in this country for an indefinite period of time and would need to begin functioning within an American rather than a Vietnamese context.⁸⁰

She criticized the programs, however, in that

⁷⁹ Mary K. Prickett, "A Description of an Effective Refugee Support System to Aid Young Children to Success in Schools in Southern California" (Ed.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1983).

⁸⁰ Kelly, From Vietnam to America, p. 125.

Americans were not clear about what their own culture was--and they had even less of a conception of

Vietnamese culture. There simply was no way to resolve these contradictions.⁸¹

The problems involved in educating the newly arrived Vietnamese refugees, both children and adults, were complex, deeply rooted in cultural values, and affected by economic, political, and psychological factors.

Perhaps the most painful part of receiving the Vietnamese refugee into the American educational system involved working with the refugee's emotional scars. In addition to adjusting to a new culture--a formidable task under the best of circumstances--the Vietnamese refugee had not only just left his home and country, perhaps forever, but in many instances brought with him the horrors of war. Phillip Snyder wrote that "the psychological shock of a young boy at the National Ward's School who saw his father disemboweled by the Viet Cong must be treated before he can be expected to concentrate on his lessons."⁸² United States educators were forewarned in many of the bilingual-bicultural reference guides of the Vietnamese refugee's psychological state:

Most refugee children have seen, directly or indirectly, war and its effects on society and people. Whether these experiences and the hazardous and trauma-filled

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 126.

⁸² Phillip C. Snyder, "Business Education in South Vietnam," Kappa Delta Pi Record 7 (December 1970): 47.

exit from their native land have affected them in any significant way, it is difficult to say. We are aware of no systematic effort to examine this problem. Thus, with the children "getting along very nicely," it is well for a teacher to keep this particular aspect of their emotional makeup in mind⁸³, just in case expert psychological help is needed.

The emotional turmoil of the Vietnamese refugee student posed a far more delicate challenge for the U.S. educator than the more tangible economic and political problems. Further, the Vietnamese tendency to internalize emotions made the problem all the more elusive.

Summary

The Vietnamese refugee who came to the United States after 1975 brought with him experience with an educational system that had roots extending to the first century B.C. Chinese rule, from that time until 967 A.D., forged an educational system in Vietnam that was influenced by Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Under the Chinese, education in Vietnam also became examination-oriented, allowing social advancement for those who showed academic prowess.

Arriving in Vietnam in the seventeenth century and ruling the country from 1861 to 1954, the French contributed their language, religion, and a Romanized writing system to the Vietnam's educational system. Under French

⁸³ Center for Applied Linguistics, A Manual for Indochinese Refugee Education 1976-1977, (Arlington, Va.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1976), p. 5.

administration, Vietnamese schools also adopted a methodology rooted in lecturing, rote learning, observation, and memorization. The Vietnamese language, history, and culture were notoriously absent from the French-run schools. Illiteracy abounded in the country at the beginning of the twentieth century, while those Vietnamese youths who did attend school and French universities found themselves unemployed or underemployed upon graduation.

After the French withdrawal in 1955, three significant events occurred within the Vietnamese educational system. First, the Vietnamese language replaced the French as the language of instruction. Secondly, the University of Saigon was founded in 1956. Finally, the number of French-administered and taught schools was gradually replaced by Vietnamese-run schools. Vietnamese nationalism swelled among its people and, had political events been different, the national school system could have become an exemplary one. However, by 1965 Vietnam was once again occupied by a foreign country, this time the United States. Many Vietnamese children went to school amidst violence, many Vietnamese youths attended school to avoid the draft, while others dropped out to enlist in the military.

For those Vietnamese children and adults who survived the war and fled to the United States, American education and reeducation posed a new set of challenges, for

American educators as well as for the refugees. First, the arrival of the refugees was relatively unexpected; American educators and government officials were generally unprepared for the number of refugees and the rapidity at which they arrived. Secondly, the lack of American training in Vietnamese culture and language created many embarrassing, if not futile, situations for both students and instructors. Thirdly, the refugees were dispersed so widely throughout the states that school districts were at some disadvantage in attempting to establish special programs for them. Fourthly, the U.S. economic climate in 1975 prohibited school districts from adequately funding programs for the refugee population, while the lack of available jobs created hardships for the adult refugees. Fifthly, the emotional trauma the refugees experienced could not be easily lessened once they entered the classroom.

While the Vietnamese refugee situation posed several distinct challenges to American educators, it also created several opportunities. On the positive side, the Vietnamese refugee had in his favor the benefit of legislation such as the Civil Rights Act and the Supreme Court Lau decision, which facilitated the establishment of special bilingual-bicultural educational programs. In addition, while some racial prejudices would be bound to exist against the newest Asian immigrants, the American public, by and large, felt a sense of duty in welcoming the Vietnamese. A national sense

of guilt over Vietnam was widespread in the mid-1970's, and whatever Americans could do to atone for the devastation of Vietnam and its people was seen as a way to alleviate that guilt. There were also opportunities created by the dispersal of the Vietnamese, in addition to the problems. Vietnamese students were immersed in the American classroom and culture and consequently were forced to learn English and American cultural mores. By and large, the Vietnamese students were unable to depend on a Vietnamese support group in the classroom and had to find support from their American counterparts and teachers. Finally, the deeply-rooted Vietnamese reverence for education, a reverence which began under the Chinese mandarin system, was carried with the refugee to the United States. This reverence could only be beneficial in helping both the refugee child and adult learner adjust to and appreciate whatever educational opportunities were made available here.

CHAPTER III

HISTORY OF THE VIETNAMESE FAMILY AND THE EXODUS

The Saigon River slides past the Old Market,
its broad waters thick with silt. There,
the rice shoots gather a fragrance,
the fragrance of my country home,
recalling my mother home, arousing deep love.

"The Saigon River"
from Vietnamese Folk Poetry,
translated by John Balaban

The Families

Originally, Mai Nguyen lived in Hanoi with her family which included her father, mother, three sisters, and three brothers. Her father was a businessman in the pharmaceutical business. Neither the mother nor the daughters worked outside the home or had ever worked. They had servants to buy the food, clean the house, and do the laundry. They were, according to Mai "well off"¹ and that,

¹ Interview with Mai Nguyen Ly and Quang Ly, Melrose Park, Illinois, 18 April, 1984. All interviews cited in this study were conducted by the author from April to December, 1984, in Melrose Park or River Forest, Illinois. Specific dates and locations are listed in the bibliography. Tapes of the interviews are permanently on file at the Triton College Library, Triton College, River Grove, Illinois. Quotations from interviews that appear hereafter in the text come from this series of interviews.

ultimately, was one of the reasons they were among the first to leave Hanoi and twenty years later, the country.

In 1954, when she was three years old, Ho Chi Minh established his Communist capital at Hanoi after Vietnam had been divided at the 17th parallel in the Geneva Conference. Mai's father moved the family to Saigon and reestablished his business.

In Vietnam: Yesterday and Today, Ellen Hammer wrote of the 1954 flight from North to South Vietnam:

Some 860,000 refugees fled from the north to the south after the Geneva Conference (in contrast to about 100,000--most of them soldiers--who went north). And hundreds of thousands of other northerners who also wished to leave were unable to do so. The northern refugees were mostly Catholic villagers, but they also included many non-Catholics who came from the urban areas. This group included members of the propertied classes, professional people, officials, and a part of the Nung ethnic minority. Their departure was evidence of the refusal of a large portion of the northern Vietnamese population to live under a Communist Regime.²

Like many of the 860,000 other North Vietnamese who fled to the South, Mai Nguyen's family went to Saigon because "we did not want to live under the Communists." Because she was so young when she moved, Mai remembered little of Hanoi.

Quang Ly's family was originally from Saigon.

Quang's grandfather had been "like a governor" over three provinces in Vietnam and lived in a mansion with his wife, children, and over one hundred servants attending them.

Quang's grandmother, Mrs. Pham, had been very attractive in

²Hammer, Vietnam: Yesterday and Today, p. 149.

her youth; "Oh so beautiful," Mai had said. Mrs. Pham had had many suitors because of her wealth and beauty.

Quang's father was in politics. "He worked for a government," Quang said, "but I don't think that he involved in politics. He don't get into any gangs, any political gang like the kind here." Quang was referring to American organized crime, a topic which we had discussed briefly that day because organized crime had recently appeared in the news. Upon hearing her husband's remark, Mai added, "Don't mention it in your paper, what he said." She was partly kidding and partly serious. Her cautiousness was apparent throughout the interviewing process, evident in such remarks, especially when the tape recorder was on.

Generally, she was much more candid when being interviewed on an informal basis without the recorder. When asked why she was so cautious, Mai replied, "Just used to it I guess." Her response, I felt, was valid; her reticence was a matter of habit, for since she had left Hanoi in 1954, Mai had been warned to "watch what she said" lest she be overheard by the Communists. Yet, the reticence could also have revealed a natural distance between the Vietnamese and Americans.

Although by this point in the research I felt as though we had established a friendship, I am fairly certain that had I been Vietnamese from a similar social class and background, our dialogue would have been much less reserved.

When asked if his mother had worked, Quang replied

that she had not. "No, 90 percent of Vietnamese mothers stay home and be a housewife," he said assuredly. Mai added, "They don't want to go out to work." Vietnam has a history of fostering a social "system which relegated women to a position of legal inferiority, usually condemning them to an inferior education as well, because Confucianist academic training was reserved exclusively for men."³ However, by the 1960's, the role of women had altered dramatically in Vietnam as girls and women were guaranteed equal educational opportunities. Their position in the work force was growing, but among the middle and upper classes, it was fairly uncommon for women to work. In the lower classes, women had to work in the rice fields and in the factories. Not having the wife work was a symbol of luxury.

There were ten people in Quang's family: his father, mother, four brothers, and three sisters. Quang, aware of the average size of most American families, began explaining why Vietnamese families were generally larger and often included members in addition to the immediate family:

You know, in my country, we're very proud to have a large family to show the family tie to the society. So, sometime you have to beg your grandfather, your great grandfathers and parents to come over and live with you, and if they don't come that means they don't like you or they get mad at you or something so you have to ask and find out why and apologize to them. So it is, you know, a pride for a family who, you know, who has four generations stay together in peace.

Quang explained more fully the Vietnamese family structure:

³ Ibid., p. 234.

I have to tell you another point that the parents only want to stay with the eldest son of the family, you know. And they don't like to stay with the in-law, with the son-in-law. For example, Mai's parents wouldn't want to come and live with me. They prefer to stay with the eldest son, and if the eldest son, for example, if the eldest son die, they stay with the second son, with next son, or the next son. But, don't go to in-law. But my parent will stay with me. But not with their daughter, no.

Mai, always the diplomat, explained that her parents' desire to live with their son and not with Quang and her did not mean that they did not like Quang; they simply traditionally preferred to live with their eldest son.

Religion

A discussion of the Vietnamese family invariably leads to a discussion of ancestor worship and religious beliefs. The Lys were Buddhist but admittedly were not actively following or participating in the Buddhist religion. In fact, they did not know where the closest Buddhist temple was located. In their religion and their practices, the Lys were representative of many Vietnamese. Gertrude Roth Li pointed out that "the majority of Vietnamese refugees coming to the United States at this time come from a primarily Buddhist tradition, a tradition which has also absorbed Taoist and Confucian principles to form a holistic world view in which man differs from nature only in degree, not in kind."⁴ By not actively practicing Buddhism, the Lys were also like many other Vietnamese for, according

⁴Gertrude Roth Li, The Vietnamese: The Challenge of

to Ellen Hammer:

The average Vietnamese is not an especially religious man. The rites he observes have lost much of their original meaning. . . . but Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism have combined to form a way of life. Together they impregnate the daily existence of the Vietnamese, determining much of his behavior, not only before his gods, but also in his relations with his fellow men.

The majority of refugees, like the majority of people in Vietnam before 1975, were Buddhist. In 1969, Crawford estimated that approximately 95% of South Vietnam was Buddhist.⁶ If the Buddhist religion was not practiced avidly in Vietnam, however, ancestor worship was:

In Vietnam, most families engage in some kind of ancestor worship, which is partially religious and partially an extension of one's filial duty toward one's parents.

An integral part of the Vietnamese world view, ancestor worship created an order for the Vietnamese no less powerful, for example, than the Western medieval notion of the Great Chain of Being.

Ancestor worshippers, the Vietnamese saw themselves as more than separate egos, as part of the continuum of life. As they took life from the earth and from the ancestors, so they would find immortality in their children who in their turn would take their place on the earth.

Sponsorship (Nyack, N.Y.: World-Relief Corporation--Refugee Services Division, 1982), p. 8.

⁵ Hammer, Vietnam: Yesterday and Today, p. 40.

⁶ Crawford, Customs and Culture of Vietnam, p. 77.

⁷ Li, Challenge of Sponsorship, p. 8.

⁸ Fitzgerald, Fire in the Lake, p. 573.

This continuum of life is a theme which kept reappearing throughout the discussions with the Lys.

Quang had defended the Vietnamese custom of having a large family by explaining that it became an issue of pride to have one's parents live with one. Yet, the notion of the family, to the Vietnamese, was more complex than that. It involved, in a very real way, religious beliefs and the Vietnamese notion of the universe. Quang spoke of the "custom" of the extended family:

You see, because I think that the reason why we have that custom is because of the religious belief, you see. The Oriental people like us believe in reincarnations. Whatever, if you do good, you get good result. Now or later. You will get good result, that's it. So if we take good care of our parents, then later on our kids would take good care of us, and then their children would take good care of them. So it tell you a line of circle, it goes around, so because we believe in that, that's why we are very, we feel comfortable doing that. Even though we are not forced to do that. And especially the social system too. That, you know, make us live that way. For example, in our country we don't have nursing home to take care of the elderly. You see, so who going to take care of the elderly? Their own children. Because we don't have a nursing home system with a nurse, a doctor, you know, who watches them over every day. You see my point?

Not as an individual but as a member of a family which gives birth, lives, dies, gives birth again, Quang had established his place in the universe.

When questioned specifically about ancestor worship and whether they practiced it, Quang and Mai outlined their family's practice:

[Quang] There's an altar. And every, um, we have a, you know, a memorial day. We have to memorize the day they die. We don't memorize the dates they were born. We

don't celebrate birthdate. But we celebrate deathdate.

[Mai] Every year . . . for the passed-away ancestors.

[Quang] I think around four generations. We have to remember four generations back. . . . We believe that we have the blessing from our ancestors; their spirit is still hanging around helping us. So we, every year, every . . . every year after that day, you know, the day of death, and new year day, we would, you know, cook good food and we place all the good food on the altar and light a candle, and the other stuff, you know, and we pray, and we invite them to return home and enjoy dinner with us.

Mai clarified that although she and Quang participated in ancestor worship, they did not set up an altar in their apartment, but her parents and Quang's parents did. "When my parents pass away, I would do it. The oldest generation still alive, whoever is still alive today will do it," she explained.

The tragedy of the Vietnamese refugee has been intensified because of his belief in ancestor worship and his subsequent attachment to the land where his ancestors were born and died. Fitzgerald wrote:

In this continuum of the family "private property" did not really exist, for the father was less of an owner than a trustee of the land to be passed on to his children. To the Vietnamese the land itself was the sacred, constant element: the people flowed over the land like water, maintaining and fructifying it for generations to come.

When asked about their attachments to the land, Quang replied, "We stick there" and Mai added, "Yes, from generation to generation, we don't move." Faced with their

⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

refugee status, Mai and Quang explained that they as well as their siblings and parents in the United States still practiced ancestor worship despite their detachment from the land. With a smile Quang said:

Even though we in U.S., we still set up an altar and celebrate and cooking and inviting and praying to the spirit of the ancestor to come over here because the spirit can go anywhere with you. They don't have to get the American airplane ticket and go here.

Whether the Lys will continue to practice ancestor worship or discontinue it after a few years as Li contends that most refugees do¹⁰ remains to be seen. Quang and Mai have managed to preserve their beliefs and practices for ten years in the United States, so their pattern to date appears well established and solid.

Education

Mai and Quang were asked to describe their educational experiences in Vietnam. Mai began by explaining that schooling began for children when they were five years old and continued through elementary school, high school, and college. When asked what she studied in elementary school, Mai became less articulate; she paused, trying to remember the subjects studied so many years ago. Perhaps she was also grasping for English words to describe her elementary schooling: "O.K. We, um divided, um, according to subject, subjects. I think we learned about, let's see . .

¹⁰Li, Challenge of Sponsorship, p. 8.

. . ." She was interrupted by Quang, who was becoming impatient with his wife's groping for words; ironically it was Mai who generally had a better grasp of English syntax and vocabulary. "The school system in Vietnam is cover almost basic subjects," Quang began, "similar to what you have here in this country. O.K., we have math, we have natural science, we have civics, history, geographic [here Mai corrected him with geography], basic everything in elementary school level and also in high school but it just different levels, you know, more advanced."

It is worth noting here the discrepancy that existed between the Vietnamese and American perceptions of Vietnamese school levels. While Quang felt the Vietnamese course content was "more advanced" than that in the United States, many U.S. educators instituted policies which placed the Indochinese student one or two years behind his placement in Indochina.¹¹

Mai and Quang both attended public schools in Vietnam. Defending their choice of schools, Quang said:

Contrary to the system here in America, in our country, only good student are admitted into public school so the one who fail go out to private school. You see, when you go into the school you have to pass admission test.

Mai concurred, adding:

So public school is much better than private school. It is state supported, yes. We don't have to pay for school. With public school--no, private school--you

¹¹ Center for Applied Linguistics, A Manual for Indochinese Refugee Education, p. 25.

have to pay.

Here the Lys were very much like the majority of Vietnamese who, after 1954, became extremely proud and supportive of the nationally-run public schools. Furthermore, they stated what few texts on Vietnamese education ever would; i.e., the blunt but candid insight that "only good student are admitted into public school so the one who fail go to private school."

Many scholars, such as Chi, Kitano, Thuy and others, have noted the important role education played in Vietnamese society. The Lys were asked how important education was to them and their families. Their responses, not surprisingly, indicated that education played a very important role in their lives in Vietnam. What they delineated, however, was the effect of social class on the Vietnamese view of education. It is also interesting to note that without being questioned specifically about the role of social class on educational beliefs, they made that an integral part of their response. According to Mai,

With certain level, o.k., like with the um, in the countryside they don't care about education at all. And the education in Vietnam is not obligationed, obligated. . . . With the um, upper middle class family they want the children to be in school.

Quang's interpretation was similar:

From middle class up they always want their children to have education but for the lower class probably because of, you know, they are busy making living, so they are not concerned very much about education, and they try to push their children out into world to work as soon as possible, so sometime, you know, they work at 10 years

old and 8 years old.

These responses were found to be internally valid when several months later, in written responses to the same question (How important was education to your family?), Mai wrote, "Education was very important to my family, especially because it was upper middle class. My parents wanted all their children, boys and girls, to have a good education." Quang as well verified his earlier oral remarks by writing, "Education to my family was the most important thing for the children. For all middle class and upper class families, education was extremely important." In addition to revealing her consistent beliefs, Mai's written response uncovered one more factor: an upper-middle class desire to maintain equal educational opportunities for both their sons and daughters. In accord with Hammer's findings that "Girls now have a greater opportunity for equal education with their brothers than ever before in the history of Vietnam,"¹² Mai's acknowledgment that her parents wanted "all their children, boys and girls, to have a good education" was extremely representative of modern Vietnam's direction in education.

The role the Vietnamese family played in the educational process was an important one. The Vietnamese family, like the Japanese family, played an important role in motivating the child, providing the child with an

¹² Hammer, Vietnam: Yesterday and Today, p. 236.

environment conducive to study, securing funds for the child's education and tutoring, and pressuring the child to do well in school.¹³

In response to a question asking "What was the family's role in the educational process?" Mai wrote, "When a family has a talented student in a talented son or daughter, they are very proud and they want to tell everybody about it." Earlier, she and Quang had spoken of the private tutoring they had both received. Mai recalled, "We have private tutoring at home, not because we are not good, but because we want to be ahead in the class all the time." Quang explained that their tutors were teachers, who "worked overtime, you know, and came to our house to do private tutoring." For both of their families, education was the most important factor in their childrens' lives, "more important than religion because it almost like religion," Quang said.

If the family played a prominent role in the Vietnamese child's education, the role of the teacher, as one might expect, was equally important. The Lys were asked to discuss the role of the teacher in Vietnam and to compare

¹³ Ronald S. Anderson, "Japanese Education" in Comparative Educational Systems, ed. Edward Ignas and Raymond Corsini (Itasca, Ill.: Peacock Publishers, Inc., 1981), pp. 268-269; Diane Profita Schiller and Herbert J. Walberg, "Japan: The Learning Society," Educational Leadership, March 1982, p. 412; Sumiya Mikio, "The Function and Social Structure of Education: Schools and Japanese Society," Journal of Social and Political Ideas in Japan 23 (1969): 129-131.

it with that of the teacher in the United States:

[Mai] We respect the teacher professions in Vietnam very much and we look up to them as the father, you know . . . we listen to them and we obey them and everything they said is right . . . we cannot talk back to them especially in elementary and high school, the elementary level and high school level. In college, we still, right Quang? . . . we cannot talk back to them, we cannot . . .

[Quang] We're not supposed to talk back even if we know they, um, we don't agree with them.

[Mai] Sometimes they are wrong too.

[Quang] Sometimes they're wrong. Sometimes we don't agree with them, but we are not supposed to talk back or argue . . . that's the way we behave toward, you know, the, uh, teacher, because she is the master and is the same level as a parent.

[Mai] [Compared to the relationship students and teachers have in the United States] I think it is quite different, the relationship between teachers and the student in the U.S. very friendly and sometime over friendly, I'd think.

[Quang] Sometimes I feel so, you know, a little angry when I see the student talking back in a rude way to a, to the instructor [in the U.S. classroom] and I don't feel that's right at all, no matter what, because, uh, in our custom they have the proverb of saying that even if you learn half a word from the teacher, he still your teacher.

When asked where they would place teachers in

Vietnam on the social scale, Mai and Quang reported them as falling towards the bottom of the scale financially, but culturally and socially teachers would rank fairly high in Vietnam:

[Mai] I think teachers are the lowest; they got the lowest pay in comparing to doctors, lawyers, and business men . . .

[Quang] They're close to the middle class I would say . . .

[Mai] But they are respectable, o.k., for little things.

They get paid low, o.k., lower pay, but they are respectable everywhere they go.

[Quang] The compensation is not very, you know, very high for what they put in or work for, but wherever they go people would bow at them, they respect [teachers as] a very respectful class of people.

[Mai] You could be very poor but have a good education and people would respect you.

The Lys' analysis of the role of the teacher in Vietnam agrees with the assessments of Kim Hong Nguyen, Thuy, Huu Phuoc Nguyen and others.¹⁴ Truly the Vietnamese teacher commanded unquestioned respect and honor from students and the community at large alike. As Lan Nguyen and Burmark pointed out, "There never was a landed aristocracy, but there has always been a nobility of the learned."¹⁵ Further, they noted the customary address of a male teacher, thay, which is an obsolete word for "daddy."¹⁶ This filial-like respect permeates the student-teacher relationship in Vietnam; as Mai said, "We look up to them as the father." Additionally, as Mai and Quang pointed out, even if a student were to realize that a teacher had given incorrect or controversial information, the student would not and, further, "cannot" disagree with the teacher. To do

¹⁴Kim Nguyen, Vietnamese Themes, p. 6; Thuy, Getting to Know the Vietnamese and Their Culture, p. 77; Huu Nguyen, Outline of Differences in Value Orientation, p. 4.

¹⁵Lan Nguyen and Lynell Burmark-Parasuraman, The Process of Americanization: Problems of the Vietnamese Refugees (Hayward, Cal.: Alameda County Superintendent of Schools, 1981), p. 10.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 18.

so would cause a great breach in the social system.

With the status of the teacher being equivalent to that of the father, the student was consequently placed in an extremely docile and submissive position. Describing the role of the Vietnamese student, Mai and Quang painted a picture of obedient, passive students:

[Mai] We always have to wait until the instructor has called on us, but that's very seldom, um, we don't like, even in college, we don't express our opinions anytime and, you know, actually, we're just busy taking notes-- we don't even have time to ask questions. . . .

[Quang] You only answer when you are asked, o.k., so for example, when the instructor asks, you know the answer, then you can raise your hand, but otherwise you sit quiet and don't disturb the class.

[Mai] Even though, like, you want to ask something, you really want to ask something, but you can't.

When asked "When could students ask questions?" Mai replied, "In tutorials, but we would pay them, pay the tutors, of course." Although Vietnam had prided itself on its "humanist, nationalist, and open" educational system,¹⁷ it was clear that only students who could afford it received the best education. Given the structure of the Vietnamese classroom and the teacher-student relationship, students unable to pay for tutorial assistance would be at a vast disadvantage, unable to have questions answered or unresolved points clarified.

Economic status definitely affected the quality of education in Vietnam despite the fact that public education

¹⁷ Elementary Education Curriculum, p. 5.

through the tertiary level was free. Nationality was yet another factor which determined educational opportunity, specifically for the Chinese population in Vietnam. At first, Quang denied that any discrimination against the Chinese existed: "No, I don't see any discrimination. I don't know nationwide if there's any discrimination problem, but at my school there really isn't." Quang rationalized this lack of discrimination as being the result of a segregated system:

Normally the Chinese people they live in the ghetto, in the Chinese ghetto, you know, like Chinatown, so they have their own schooling there. You know, they have school there their own Chinese students go in that school so there would be no discrimination . . . They are free to go to any school they want to, you know, but up to their choice, they chose the school where most of the Chinese students go. In our country there we don't divide the school system by district like the system over here. So for example, if I feel like going to school in Lake Forest, if I can afford the transportation, I just go and be on register there. So the Chinese people are free to go to any school in the city or outside the city, but they prefer to go to school in Chinatown where they live. But I don't see, I didn't see any discrimination; in fact, in my class there was a Chinese student.

Sounding rather like the separate but equal laws established in the United States in 1896 with the Plessy v. Ferguson case, both Quang and Mai defined a stable, problem-free Vietnamese educational system. "So actually we don't have any problem," Mai concluded, "and [the Chinese] don't want to go to Vietnamese school."

However satisfying this segregated system sounded, its flaws became apparent when Mai and Quang were pressed on

the issue. When asked if there would honestly be no problems or changes if Chinese students attended Vietnamese schools in greater numbers, Mai admitted:

Probably if the Chinese wanted to be in our school maybe we get some discrimination because we don't want to say, we don't want to make friends with them sometimes . . . we cannot mix together between Chinese and Vietnamese. . . It's hard to accept between Chinese and Vietnamese marriage.

Finally, reluctantly, Quang admitted as well how he would treat a Chinese student in his classroom:

I may tease him, saying "You have slim eyes" and so on. . . . But the Chinese student, I think they felt uneasy when the history was covered in class, you know, because when we passed through the paragraph of the conflict between Vietnamese and Chinese and they might feel, you know, uneasy. . . . So, we joke a lot about Chinese people, you know, just like here you joke on Polish, you say Polish joke, or Pollack, or so on.

The prejudice exhibited by the Lys against the Chinese is of interest here not so much for an analysis of prejudice per se, for that is outside the scope of this study. Rather the Lys' feelings towards the Chinese are interesting to note because when the Lys came to the United States they were, like many other Vietnamese refugees, assumed to be Chinese or Japanese. Not being able to distinguish Asian nationalities, many Americans quite unknowingly mistook Vietnamese for Chinese, causing some amount of internal discomfort, to be sure: "When people tell you that you look like Chinese you don't like it, you know, the whole idea," Mai claimed indignantly.

While war had a devastating effect on many

Vietnamese schools, teachers, and students, the Lys, because of their relatively high social class and location in Saigon, escaped many of the ravages of the war. Asked to describe the effects of war on schooling in Vietnam, Quang replied:

All of the male students were affected by the war the most because when they draft, the age for drafting, they can get the excuse for the draft by, you know, continue going to school--one grade every year. But if they cannot pass the grade or pass the test, they will be drafted. So they are, they work under pressure constantly while studying. So that's the worse part of the effect of war on education. For example myself, you know, I was studying under a lot of pressure. So some time I don't feel enjoying, I didn't feel enjoying study. Some time I felt so bored and so scared also, you know.

Far from the experiences of many Vietnamese who were actually drafted or others who witnessed the effects of war on their homes and schools, the Lys were at first only vicariously affected by the war. To Quang, the war meant being "bored and so scared also" as he studied to stay in school and avoid the draft. To Mai the war meant "hearing bombs and gunfire in the distance and being scared, very scared."

By 1975, Mai Nguyen and Quang Ly had both been studying law at the University of Saigon for several years. Both were in their last year of school, beginning to prepare to take their exams. Both had decided to study law on their own; their parents had not pushed them into that course of study. They had chosen law because it was "a good profession, honorable, and it made a lot of money." They

had not known each other at the University of Saigon; that was not unusual, however, as there were over 64,000 students attending the University in 1975. They were both twenty-three years old, close to graduation, excellent students, and both with good family backgrounds. Quang planned to work with the government as his father had, and Mai wanted to work with the state department so that she could work and travel after graduation. They were both waiting for the American and South Vietnamese armies to defeat the Viet Cong and end the war. Then, on April 21, the Communists captured Xuan Loc, the last South Vietnamese defense before Saigon. Nine days later, Communist troops marched victoriously through Saigon.

Flight from Vietnam

Mai remembered the flight to the United States.

When she spoke of it her English became less fluent than it normally was. She often hesitated, forgetting English words, making syntactic errors. At other times, her discourse proceeded rapidly; she spoke almost in a frenzy to reach a destination in thought no more clear than her original geographic destination ten years earlier. Mai was asked, "Can you tell me what your escape from Vietnam was like?"

I think it 21 April when we leave. Luckily we might, might, um, one of the friend of the family, o.k., who work with the embassy, American embassy, o.k., and so, he was allowed to get out of the country, but he didn't want to so he asked us to take his place and we, I

think, I don't know, but I think my parents had to pay him, you know, to buy a way out. And I didn't know anything about that, and I say I didn't want to go, I 23. So I didn't want to go by myself, not by myself, but with my sister and brothers. . . . My parents asked you have to go, you cannot stay here because the Communists will come, o.k., then we, I had no choice so we, um, we took his place. . . .

Here Mai was interrupted by Quang who was very aware of his wife's emotional distress and attempted to clarify her story:

[Quang] You see, at that time everyone who worked for American, either with military airbase or embassy, or anywhere, who has, who worked for American, could go with their immediate families. One man can have eight people in his family go altogether. So that why Mai, her sister and brothers the whole group, take the place of his family and go because his family didn't go.

[Mai] Also, the important thing is because our family's last name had the same last name. . . .

[Quang] with the guy who worked for the embassy.

[Mai] So that's why we could go, so . . .

[Quang] He claimed them to be their . . .

[Mai] family

[Quang] in the same family

[Mai] Like Americans had no way of knowing that. But he didn't want to go.

[Quang] He's still in Vietnam.

[Mai] He's still in Vietnam, yea. So right now my family is still sending him gift in order to show him that we are . . .

[Quang] grateful for his . . .

[Mai] But I think he wanted to go.

[Quang] Now I think he wants to go, I bet. Before he didn't know, you know, he could not imagine what Communist could be.

At first only five of the seven Nguyen children left. Mai, the eldest girl at twenty-three, was in charge of her four siblings. The children were allowed to bring one suitcase among the five of them. It held "papers of school work, pictures, important papers, family things, only a little clothes. We had to burn all our other papers so the Communists would learn nothing about us." Unable to go with their children at first, Mai's mother and father escaped Vietnam several days later. Mai continued:

O.K., we, I and my two brothers and two sister, o.k., we went to our escape first, o.k., but my older brother, my oldest brother and my parents they came later by helicopter because by brother he was helicopter pilot, he was a pilot, but um, so they came . . . so they had the hard time because they waited until the last minute to get out of the country.

Mai's brother flew the helicopter to their back yard and first took their father. Many Vietnamese scrambled to climb onto the helicopter, for during the last days of April, panic had seized the South Vietnamese people. It wasn't until the helicopter reached the U.S. military aircraft carrier that they realized the mother had been left behind. Mai said:

So many people wanted to leave Vietnam by that time, we were shocked the U.S. withdrew. No one believed it, um, the withdrawal. So people grabbing, pushing to get on the helicopter . . . They grabbed on to my mother, o.k., so she left behind so my brother had to go back again to get her, so dangerous.

Mai's description of the panic surrounding the evacuation of refugees has been verified by many sources, among them Stanley Karnow's Vietnam: A History. Describing the

evacuation of American personnel and Vietnamese supporters,

Karnow wrote:

The operation, conducted in an atmosphere of desperation, was close to miraculous. The original plan had been for buses to pick up the Americans and Vietnamese designated for departure at appointed places around the city and to deliver them to various helicopter pads. But the procedure quickly broke down. Mobs of hysterical Vietnamese, clamoring to be evacuated, blocked the buses. Thousands surged toward the traffic takeoff spots, screaming to be saved. Rumors of impending Communist shelling swept through the crowd and exacerbated the panic. . . . By dawn on April 30, its streets deserted, Saigon awaited the Communists.

One of Mai's sisters and her husband stayed in Saigon. Perhaps she stayed because she was married and the Nguyens had passes for only eight members of their family. Mai was extremely emotional on this topic and was always close to tears when she spoke of her sister in Vietnam. She was also rather vague in explaining why her sister did not leave, and it was impossible to press this issue:

They [sister and husband] wanted to get out of the country but they didn't know that we lost [the war] right away. Many people still believe that, o.k., . . . That the Americans were . . . would save us, o.k., and-- and even us, we just, nobody knows what going on at that time, you know, everything suppose to be kept secret so we just like whispering around . . .

Nothing more would be said by either Mai or Quang regarding Mai's sister's decision to stay in Vietnam. Yet, she often spoke of her sister and her husband and their five children living in Vietnam. Her brother-in-law taught literature and

¹⁸Karnow, Vietnam: A History, p. 668.

French. They had, according to Mai:

. . . so little money and the twins are so skinny. If you get sick in Vietnam, you die. There is no medicine, no doctors, no hospitals to help you. They are so poor and there is nothing to eat. My sister did not want so many children, but there is nothing she could do. The twins, for example, were accidents. We try to send

money and medicine but they will not get it. I must send it, o.k., through my sister in Germany who sends to Vietnam. So sad. I hope, I always hope the U.S. will change relations with Vietnam.

At first Mai, and her brothers and sisters who did escape, went to the Philippines and on to Guam. They then flew to a refugee camp in Arkansas. Although she had studied English "for years" in Vietnam, Mai had problems speaking it throughout their flight:

Everyone sounded different from my teachers. My teachers were Vietnamese, of course. So no one could understand me, o.k., when I try to talk English. So I have to write everything. Everything. My writing is very good so they understand that.

Quang's escape story was less dramatic than Mai's and was consequently recounted in a calm, almost matter-of-fact, manner, as if he had had to re-tell it many times before:

I had no connection with America in any way, so I just wanted to come. My father worked for Vietnamese government. We had no hope of getting out. But, however, at the last minute, o.k., I have to put it this way so you understand, o.k. My, I have a brother-in-law, you know, who was exchange student and he went to the University of Miami at that time, o.k., and my sister and her husband both in United States, so when they heard of falling government, South government, and they went to the embassy here try to sponsor us over, to come over to America. But we did not receive any paper or anything until the last minute, and then the paper came and we brought that to the American Airways and asked them, you know, to let us go. Just lucky at the

last minute, that's all.

My entire family came, and then my sister-in-law family, you know, the in-law family of my sister also come along. We flew directly to, yes to Guam. We stayed in Guam for about 10 days and then from Guam we go out to Arkansas, to the refugee camp in Arkansas, for a check. And the interesting thing during that evacuation is my sister, you know, gave birth to a boy right in the airplane, you know, while we were in the flight. So my nephew be the first refugee born in the United States. So that's very good. You know, every year on his birthday we remember the evacuation out of the country.

Along with fifty-thousand other Americans and Vietnamese, Mai Nguyen and Quang Ly escaped Vietnam in April of 1975. They were among the first of the Vietnamese refugees to flee, escaping in relatively good health and by air rather than by boat. Either serendipitously like Mai's family, or by design like Quang's, they were among the privileged to receive authorization to come to the United States. Later refugees would escape Vietnam with only vague hopes of being welcomed in another country. Despite risking their lives, some of the later refugees, the "boat people," were refused entrance to the already refugee-hostile and overcrowded countries of Thailand, the Philippines, and Guam. They were sent back out to sea to an even greater uncertainty.

CHAPTER IV

RESETTLEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

No one, they said, had ever left Vietnam before. Not in the proud history of Vietnam. Not in two thousand years of struggle against China, no matter how savage the defeat. Not in the great famine of 1945 when so many died in the North, a famine intensified by the war against the French. The northerners did not even leave the North and come South where there was food.

Now, and only now, were people leaving Vietnam-- anyone who could get out by boat or slip away in any manner.

The Refugee Camps

Unquestionably rich in its history, the United States welcomed another wave of people unto its shores in the late spring of 1975. One year before its two-hundredth anniversary, the United States received over 130,000 Vietnamese refugees at four geographically separate resettlement camps: Camp Pendleton in California, Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, and Elgin Air Force Base in Florida. In Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration and Assimilation, Dinnerstein and Reimers defined three chronological periods of U.S. immigrant

¹Harrison Salisbury, ed., Vietnam Reconsidered (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 214.

history: the period between 1820 and 1930 during which the "old immigrants," people from northern and western Europe along with the French Canadians and Chinese, entered the U.S.; the period between 1880 and 1920 when the "new immigrants," people from southern and eastern Europe along with the Japanese came to the U.S.; and the period from 1920 to the present which saw Spanish-speaking migrants from Mexico and the Caribbean, refugees from Hitler's persecutions, World War II, as well as the cold war, and immigrants eligible for admission due to congressional action since 1965.² The Vietnamese, of course, fell into this last period, and like the refugees of World War II, fled to the United States not by design but out of necessity.

A refugee, unlike an immigrant, leaves his native country not so much because he wants to discover a new life in a land rich with opportunity, but rather because he must leave his native country or face persecution, imprisonment, or death. Gail Kelly draws the distinction between refugees and immigrants in the following manner:

Refugees differ from immigrants in that immigrants are persons who seek new roots, and entry into a different social and cultural setting. For immigrants, the country they choose to exchange for their land of birth is a new one where accommodations need be, and are, willingly made. Immigrants to the U.S. traditionally have left their old societies behind for the society

² Leonard Dinnerstein and David Reimers, Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration and Assimilation (New York: New York University Press, 1977), p. 12.

either of Americans or of their compatriots, who have also come to this country in search of new roots. Vietnamese were not so motivated when they entered the U.S. They considered themselves part of Vietnamese society and saw their stay in this country as temporary, lasting only until the new government fell.

Bruce Grant noted another, more formal, definition of a refugee:

A refugee is now defined by the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the status of refugees as a person who, owing to "well-founded fear" of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is outside the country of his nationality or habitual residence.⁴

While an immigrant looks forward to his new life in a country he has chosen over his old, a refugee looks back in anguish and longing at the country he has been forced to leave.

Throughout several formal, informal, and guided interviewing sessions, Quang and Mai were asked to discuss or were questioned about their experience as refugees. True to both Kelly's and Grant's description of the refugee, Quang reported his feelings of utter loss upon his arrival in the United States. When asked how well Americans treated the refugee, he replied:

At that time, I didn't have any real feeling toward the American or the American treatment for the refugee at all. Because, at that time the only thing I felt was a big loss and a big emptiness and that's all. See, I didn't have time to think how they treat me, how they give me food and, you know, what we talked about it because you just lost a country that you, you know,

³ Kelly, From Vietnam to America, p. 2.

⁴ Grant, The Boat People, p. 2.

loved so much so you feel a big loss and very much emptiness.

Although Quang had travelled to the United States with his entire family, it was as if he were suffering a great bereavement; essentially he was experiencing a death of part of himself, a separation from the land which had embodied his family's and, therefore, his own spirit.

Resettlement in the United States occurred, luckily, after Mai and Quang had experienced life in a refugee camp in Guam. To some extent, the American refugee camps were far superior to those in Guam. Mai reported:

. . . about the Fort Chaffee Camp, the camp is quite different, we have our facilities compared to the Guam's. I stay there [in Guam] three days, and I had to live in the tent on the beach . . . It was pretty hot, it was Guam, in the tropics, it was hot and in the evenings it was cold. The weather, terrible. And we had to stay in the tents on the beach. So, compared to Guam, your facilities at Fort Chaffee were pretty good. Yea, and they--at Fort Chaffee--they try to provide us three meals a day: breakfast, lunch, and dinners; the food was plenty, but they didn't know how to prepare the food, so nobody wants to go to the--what do you call it?

[Quang] The messhall.

[Mai] The messhall to eat.

[Quang] It's a military camp, so they have the barrack and the messhall.

When asked about the camp's medical services, Mai responded positively:

Oh, yea. I admire that service. I like it. You see the service that they provide in the camp by American people for the camp people is, I think, is very adequate. They have medical facility. They have a military doctor, military nurse, they provide medicine when you need it. They even have busing service for you. When you get sick, they bus you to the hospital.

And, all the service were, too; were excellent. like in the barrack, if something go wrong, the light went out or the faucet, the water get out on the hallway, they come and fix it. So the service was good.

In short, the refugee camp at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, was noted as providing adequate if not rather good physical facilities by Quang and Mai, two Vietnamese refugees who were among the first to enter the U.S. Beyond meeting their physical wants, what other services were the camps providing for the refugees? The Lys were asked to describe what they would be doing, what experiences they would be having in a given day at the camp:

[Quang] Most of the time, we didn't have anything to do in the camp, so we stay idle. Sometimes we gather friends in a group, you know, and discuss about everything.

[Mai] We sang. We wondering about people left behind and we were--um, and who could go, you know, who could get out of the country and who stay behind and--we, just the only thing we were doing, we just, whomever we met we just say, "o.k., how about your parents, o.k., did they--are they here or are they stay behind.

[Quang] In other words, we didn't do anything productive.

[Mai] Yea, there were no class, no teachers at that time, and . . .

[Quang] At that time I thought they was just for the purpose of processing the new immigrant only. You know, just like a short stop for the new refugee waiting to have a sponsor to get out. Now I think that they set up the camp to receive refugees there because of their obligation, that they feel guilty of letting the South Vietnam fell into Communist hands or they think that they should do something just to ease the guilt.

The Lys were asked to describe what they learned in the camp either through formal classes or informal

situations:

[Mai] We spent most of the time, I spent some time studying English, yea. Everybody trying, I think that true, everybody trying, but you couldn't study much.

[Quang] It may sound funny, but the first thing you learn in the camp is how to get in line and wait. We never had to get in line before.

[Mai] We just try to push.

[Quang] For any service; for any kind of things.

[Mai] We had to get in line to wait, I mean for the meal, for food. That make us so ashamed. The first time, that's what I felt at that time, and I didn't want anybody to see me waiting in line for food because, but, actually everybody . . .

[Quang] A lot of people feel very much embarrassed when they have to get in line for food, it's just like . . .

[Mai] Begging.

[Quang] Beggars.

[Mai] Yea, that the only thing I didn't like at that, but . . .

[Quang] Really, you get used to it.

[Mai] Yea, everybody did it.

[Quang] What other choice you have at that time? So, . . .

[Mai] No choice, yea. And let's see, we, American people, they are trying, um, they are nice, but it's hard for us to communicate with them at first because of the language barriers, and then, our people felt very close at that time because we were homeless people.

[Quang] In Vietnam, we don't have a kind of big supermarket over here, with several lanes, you know, checkout lanes, so we never have traffic congestion. We wouldn't shop anyway. We have maids. And they just go to the market and shop. We no, we don't have the experience of getting in line and waiting our turn for service. But that's a good thing to learn.

[Mai] I think it's very orderly.

[Quang] I see the American people as funny standing in line, but it's happening when I admitted that the first thing I learned here was how to get in line.

[Mai] What a lesson to learn.

[Quang] I should have learned other lesson.

[Mai] We spend most of time study English even though we didn't get much thinking, but, we try.

[Quang] You couldn't get your mind on studying at that time because your mind was occupied by all kind of worrying and things, so even if you try to study, I doubt that you get anything.

When asked if they received any formal instruction on American culture or society, the Lys replied:

[Quang] No, they, the things that the people who ran the camp at that time concerned the most, it put people into bi-lingual classes, English classes as a second language, for people to learn English. So maybe during that learning processing, the teacher would say something about the outside life. But not formal orientation classes. No, we don't have such thing in camp.

[Mai] . . . at that time, it was still early, you know, we, I think we were the first group. Nothing much was set up.

They were asked about this first group of refugees who came to the United States. What perceptions did the Lys have about the other Vietnamese in the camp with them:

[Mai] Most of them I think, they were educated people and the first group of them were quite, um, of the higher officer, you know, what do you call--high-ranking officer of the government.

[Quang] Most of the people at that time was the urban people from the city, from Saigon. And they are above middle-class people.

[Mai] But we felt homesick and we sometime, our people-- I had talked to people, and some people were depressing, and they wanted to go back to Vietnam, you know, and actually about, how many?--800 people?

[Quang] Yea, 800 people high up, you know, um, could be returned to Vietnam. And they did actually return.

[Mai] After three months, yea. When we were there. Yes, they had something came up here, I remember, and we were so boring, confused about our future.

[Quang] At the end of the war, we were very much confused. Nobody would know what happened tomorrow and what was going on because both the American government and the Vietnamese government at that time try to hide most of the information. They didn't tell the truth, you know, to the people of what's happening. And then, whoever have some connections with government people or with Americans learn that they had to go, o.k. So that's a lot of families with the husbands stay behind too the last day and send his wife and kids, you know, along with the American evacuation about a week or ten days before the last day of the war, and then those men stay behind thinking that he would be able to get out later, but actually not. You see, and then when we would hear his wife and kid arrive at Fort Chaffee camp, and we learn that he stay behind, they request to go back.

[Mai] So many of them just waiting and waiting for relatives to come and, they wonder about the future too. Even we . . .

[Quang] Because you don't know anything. You don't know what's going to be out there. How you're gonna get ahead and how you're gonna support yourself.

[Mai] Because people will trick us, but so many think confusing--because we didn't have anything to do so we sit and thought about the worst things, so that why people depressed at time. That's what we are thinking, when, I don't know, whenever we have plenty of food here, always thinking about people in Vietnam--wish I could give it to them.

Throughout the interview, time after time, both the Lys were extremely polite, maintaining a guarded reserve over what they said about American hospitality at the refugee camp. On only one occasion, after three sessions pertaining to the refugee camps, did Quang show any bitterness towards his American hosts:

O.K., you know, in American, the camp employee who also want to learn about the Vietnamese people by approaching me and asking me if Vietnamese have shoes when they were in my country, and I felt it was a very impolite way to ask, and I felt he tried to put down the Vietnamese people. So, I got so mad, you know, and that very expression, you know, at that time I--he asked me if you had TV in your country, did you have a refrigerator, you know, how to use refrigerator, what do you eat, did you eat chicken, did you eat egg, so what did think that we are? That we still live in a jungle and using stone or have no fire?

At this point, Quang broke into laughter and shook his head.

Among the first to come to the United States, Quang and Mai were members of what Gail Kelly called the "first wave" of refugees, "individuals who were relatively well-prepared to live in the United States . . . [they] spoke English well, were relatively well-educated, had skills presumed marketable in the American economy, and were, for the most part, urbanized and Westernized."⁵ Although the camps were less prepared for them because as Mai said "it was still early . . . [and] we were the first group," this first wave of refugees had a great advantage over subsequent waves who were "lower-level Vietnamese government officials, teachers, rank-and-file members of the Vietnamese army and navy, petty traders, farmers and fishermen who were not necessarily urban, had few skills usable in the United States, spoke little or no English, and were totally unacquainted with life outside their parishes or villages in

⁵Kelly, From Vietnam to America, p. 35.

Vietnam."⁶ Educated, from upper-middle-class families living in Saigon, Quang and Mai were better candidates for assimilation than their countrymen who arrived in the United States several years, or even several months, after them.

Well aware of the fact that they were among the first to arrive in the United States, Mai and Quang were also aware of the understandable administrative confusion and lack of appropriate orientation programs and classes set up at that time for the Vietnamese refugees. Nevertheless, they were asked to evaluate the camps as honestly as they could and to suggest how the relocation process could be improved. Specifically, they were asked a series of questions: "How helpful, in general, do you think the camps were for you? Do you think there could have been a better way of dealing with the Vietnamese refugee and would you have any suggestions? If right now both of you were in charge of dealing with a new group of Vietnamese refugees, what kinds of improvements would you make?" Their responses follow:

[Quang] Well, you know, in my opinion, I think that no matter how good or how much improve or how bad in the camps, people still no like to stay in the camp, you see, because they feel they lost their freedom. Whenever you stay in any kind of camp, you cannot get around, get out and isn't your choice. So, no matter how good the camp, people don't like it. O.K., so if I run the camp now for another group of refugees, I think to improve, the thing they need to improve to run the camp is to process them fast. Let them get out fast because they are very much anxious to get out, to go

⁶ Ibid., p. 36.

back to normal life, to have something to do productively--not stay idle. When you stay idle, you feel awful. Like in my case, I am young, I have a lot of energy, and I want to work. I don't want to stay idle. I want to do something. To support myself or something, to have people not just . . .

[Mai] I don't know about later on, but at that time we didn't have any ordinary information on American life. What we did know, we had learned only through the books in Vietnam--so we were so confused and empty when we get out of the camp and came to Chicago. We learn by experience and later on when we left the sponsor, they help us, and you know . . .

[Quang] See, so to get, to answer that question a little better, I would suggest that anybody who run the camp right now for any group of refugee, first thing they should do is try to get them out fast. As fast as they can. Secondly, they must provide visual orientation for the refugee, because by talking you never can understand or imagine anything. So you show them video or film how life gonna be like out here, real life: how the supermarket look like, how people buy thing, and how people pay. And teach them about money system. And what the dollar worth, so they don't expect too much, you see, because, for example, in my country, a dollar may be worth 700 piasters. Then I can buy like a 10 pounds of rice, for example. But over here with a dollar I couldn't buy 10 pounds of rice, so I get disappointed. So I need that kind orientation. You see, and I also need to look at something, visual orientation, instead of just somebody talking to me. Another important point to me is when they try to show the image of America, they should show us the good and also the bad. That mean the truth, you see, because when I was in camp, I contact some American, and I get the impression that when I get out there be just like heaven, but when you get out here in real life you get into rough neighborhood, you know it's not heaven, you see, and you get kinda disappointed. We felt a lot of disappointment and depression.

Disappointment and depression filled the lives of the Vietnamese refugee for varying periods of time after the departure from Vietnam. At first, as Quang and Mai have noted, the refugee felt a great emptiness after having left nearly everything and everyone they had know and loved.

Yet, once in the United States, they experienced an initial appreciation for the refugee camp's facilities, especially following their experience in Guam. That appreciation faded rapidly after the hard realities of the Arkansas camp became apparent: the degrading lines for food and services, the insulting questions on Vietnamese culture raised by a naive American camp employee, the lack of appropriate orientation classes or materials, the absence of any significant activities for the refugees, and the interminable wait.

Asked to evaluate the experience and to suggest improvements, Quang and Mai proffered the following advice:

1. Process the refugees quickly. To stay idle in the camps was profoundly upsetting: "Like in my case, I am young, I have a lot of energy, and I want to work. I don't want to stay idle. . . ."
2. Give the refugee much more information on American life and culture: "What we did know, we had learned only through books in Vietnam . . . so we were so confused and empty"
3. Provide visual orientation for the refugee due to the significant language barrier which made verbal communication ineffectual: ". . . by talking you never can understand or imagine anything. So you show them video or film how life gonna be like out here, real life"
4. Instruct the refugee, at first, on the most practical

aspects of American life: ". . . how the supermarket look like, how people buy thing, and how people pay. And teach them about the money system . . ."

5. Show the refugee both the positive and negative sides of American life so that he has a realistic picture of the culture and so that he can be prepared for a wide variety of experiences: ". . . when I was in camp . . . I get the impression that when I get out there be just like heaven, but when you get out here into real life you get into a rough neighborhood, and you know it's not heaven . . ."

Unquestionably, life in the refugee camp, for at least the first group of refugees like Quang and Mai's, was uncomfortable and not nearly as helpful to the refugee as it could have been. Without meaningful classes, orientation programs, or activities for the refugees, the camps became nothing more than way stations; the Vietnamese were placed on a holding pattern until they could be processed into homes or organizations throughout the United States. The transition from a war-torn Asian country to the United States could have been facilitated. Yet, in 1975, despite all the rhetoric and agony the American public had expressed over Vietnam, there were few people who knew either the Vietnamese language or culture sufficiently to aid the refugee in his adjustment.

With all its faults, Fort Chaffee, Arkansas,

nevertheless served Quang Ly and Mai Nguyen particularly well: it was there that the two young refugees met and decided to begin their new life in the United States together.

Educational and Social Programs: Sponsorship

The lack of any organized activities for the Vietnamese refugees at Fort Chaffee in 1975 caused a bright, young, and energetic group of them to find their own work. Uninterested in the level of English classes offered at the Camp, Quang and Mai worked voluntarily for the YMCA group at Fort Chaffee:

[Quang] Oh, they did provide English classes . . . But, you see, the English classes still in the lower level than, what we have known. So, we find some work to do, you know, to pass the time in the camp. So we voluntarily worked for the YMCA group in the camp. We distributed sporting equipment and scheduled games to entertain people. So we do that kind of work, that's why we form group. . . . We form a group of young people student, and we were all 17 or 20 of us were sponsored in a whole big group over to Chicago by Catholic Charity. And they promise a lot of things.

At Fort Chaffee, Mai and Quang decided they must leave their families if they were to become sponsored. Mai explained:

. . . the sponsor wouldn't take more than four, for each family--that's what we heard--so we said we better split it and we could get out the camp as soon as possible.

[Quang] The reason for the separation is because we had the impression, and we weren't holding back, that the large family is hard, you know, they will have hard time looking for sponsor. And if we don't have sponsor, we cannot get out of camp. So we have to split the family again into smaller group, see. For example, one American family would like to sponsor at most four

people at a time. They don't want an eight-person group.

By forming a group of students, Mai and Quang, along with about seventeen other Vietnamese students who had worked as volunteers in the camp for the YMCA, were brought to Chicago and sponsored as a group by Catholic Charities. Asked to describe their American sponsors, both Quang and Mai became uncharacteristically critical and vexed. Their description of the role and effectiveness of Catholic Charities follows:

[Quang] They are the primary sponsor. To put it that way, but they didn't do anything. . . .

[Mai] They didn't do anything they tried to; first they put us in the bad area in Chicago Uptown, where prostitutes and all the--what do you call--the drugs people--peddlers, everything, and we were so shocked about that.

[Quang] We scared. We scared to death.

[Mai] Yea, and everything nice about America just . . .

[Quang] Collapsed; whatever we thought about America.

[Mai] At that time, "Is that America? Is that America?" And in the evening they put us four people in one bedroom, one studio.

[Quang] Actually, we had no bathroom just a studio, and they place four of us in one studio.

[Mai] They tried to put us in, on welfare right away and we were, we refused to go to public aid at that time. They tried to put us on public aid because they were, I think, receiving funds from the government to help us the first few months. I think about that time, I don't know how much, exactly how much, but the first few months they were supposed to resettle us, you know. I mean, Quang, is that how much money they had to pay, do you know?

[Quang] At that time, I don't know, but I learn later because, through, you know, public aid. I work for public aid and I had a chance to read some kind of

contract, and of what federal government provide to the refugee and what the agencies--the sponsoring agencies--you know, have to do for the refugee when they sign the contract. . . . they provide \$500 resettlement money to the sponsor per person.

At this point, I remarked how meager \$500 was to resettle a person in the United States, a remark which caused Quang to launch into a vitriolic attack on the sponsorship process:

[Quang] You think it was little, but they don't spend more than \$200 on the rent, so I don't know what they do with the rest. That I never find out. . . . They put us, four in one studio, they gave us some pocket money, and then right on the second day in Chicago, they try to bring us to public aid office for assistance, but they should not. They should, according to the contract they agreed with the government, that they should resettle the refugee, try to locate a job for the refugee, and try to take them to school to learn English. We feel so ashamed applying for public aid, so we refuse. And the whole group protested. One of our friend in the group also threatened to, you know, call the newspaper and tell them what's happening with us. . . . So finally they give up pushing us, and they say, "well, if you don't want to apply for public aid then just please go there and apply for the medical card." For Medicaid. And we also said no. And most of us find a job within a week. Then after we find a job then that's it. We never contact them again, or they never contact us again. And we on our own.

[Mai] Not for good, though.

[Quang] You see, back in Fort Chaffee, we have a friend who employed who worked for YMCA. And that friend . . . he American, working for YMCA, o.k.? And he come in the camp and try to help the refugee to have some recreation activity, you know. And then he follow up our group when we come to Chicago. He want to see what's going on, and after he heard our complaint you know, toward that sponsoring agency, he came here and try to get contact with the other charity group which was the Erie Neighborhood House, that's in the west side, o.k.--Erie Neighborhood House. That charity is right in the Hispanic area--they not related to YMCA. It just you know, a charity group. And then, he get contact with that group and then tell our story to the director of the house, the neighborhood house, and then we come over and talk with him. They try to match up and get a

sponsor for us.

[Mai] Through their help, my sponsor wanted to meet us because we were a group of students. Because I had my law studies, they try to match us with people who are lawyers or have some law studies. So they were very helpful, very nice people. We still keep in touch and they very nice.

[Quang] My sponsor was a village president of Oak Park, Jim McClurg. Through the Erie Neighborhood House, they try to locate a sponsor for us by setting up a party, you know, and have a whole group of sponsor come over with a whole group of refugee and then let us talk and communicate with other. After that, and they found out about our background, they say that o.k., they can help us with our background. . . . the thing is they try to match the background. My sponsor was a lawyer, so he, after he heard that I went to law school, he say o.k., he can help. If I want to go back to law school, and he an excellent source of help.

[Mai] And my sponsor, she had a son and he's a lawyer, so, I think they match--they try to help--because we a group of students, we want to go back to school then.

[Quang] So, after we were met with the sponsor, we saw the rainbow then.

Mai's and Quang's criticism of Catholic Charities

echoed a similar criticism made by Ellen Matthews, a sponsor of a Vietnamese family, in her book Culture Clash. Matthews attacked Catholic Charities for engendering dependence among the refugees by, first, encouraging them to apply for welfare, Medicaid, and public housing and, secondly, by discouraging economic, social, or cultural self-reliance at a later date. Matthews claimed, for example, that

Catholic Charities sends out a newsletter each month to the refugees and their sponsors. It tells of scholarships for the needy, fee language programs, ways to avoid paying late penalties on electric bills--all well and good, even necessary sometimes, but not always or indefinitely or for everyone--a fact the newsletter

fails to reveal.⁷

She complained that, despite its good intentions, the church was assuming that the only way the Vietnamese could survive in the United States was by being dependent on charitable Americans. This assumption was, of course, contrary to the very nature of many Vietnamese. As Gertrude Li pointed out:

Traditionally, the husband may lose the respect of his family if he does not provide for the family's well-being. The sponsor might help refugees by making them more aware of the negative aspects of welfare.⁸

Quang's assessment pointedly illustrates how erroneous Catholic Charities was in promoting welfare to all the refugees:

We feel so ashamed applying for public aid. So we refuse. And the whole group protested. One of our friend in the group also threatened to, you know, call the newspaper and tell them what's happening with us. . . . So finally they give up pushing us . . .

Misjudging the Vietnamese character, assuming they would prefer going on welfare, or at least finding welfare a simpler solution to the Vietnamese refugee problem, Catholic Charities attended to the physical needs of the refugee and neglected the psychological. Such mistakes were understandable and certainly forgivable given the rapidity of the refugee arrival to the United States. Unfortunately, the mistake was hardly forgettable and left an indelible impression on the minds of at least one group of refugees.

⁷ Matthews, Culture Clash, p. 83.

⁸ Li, Challenge of Sponsorship, p. 8.

Sponsorship under the best-planned circumstances would be trying for both the sponsor and the recipient. In the Handbook for Indochinese Refugee Sponsors, the role of the sponsor is described as "not only a home, but the friendship and emotional support so desperately needed."⁹ The Handbook makes no pretense that sponsorship will be easy:

The most difficult barrier for both sponsors and refugees to overcome is in reaching an understanding of the expectations of each other. As in all human relationships, a lack of communication often creates or intensifies misunderstandings. It is important to¹⁰ bridge any gaps between the sponsors and refugees.

Bridging any gaps was, of course, sound advice, but much easier said than done.

Critical of and disappointed with their first sponsor, Catholic Charities, Mai and Quang found fault with their very placement in an Uptown Chicago neighborhood filled with "prostitutes . . . the drugs people . . . peddlers, everything." Not only were they scared to death by the neighborhood, they were also crammed into a studio apartment, four people to a bedroom with no bathroom. Finally, adding to their dismay, they were strongly encouraged to go on welfare, an act which was debilitating at best to a group of young, healthy, industrious, urban, and educated Vietnamese from middle to upper-middle-class

⁹ Handbook for Indochinese Refugee Sponsors (Olympia, Wa.: Office of Indochinese Project, 1980), p. 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

families. It was no wonder that they felt ". . . everything nice about America just . . . collapsed."

Fortunately, Quang and Mai were able to leave their first neighborhood through the help of their American friend who had worked for the YMCA with them in Fort Chaffee. He got the group of Vietnamese refugee students in contact with the Erie Neighborhood House, located at 1347 W. Erie, Chicago. Founded in 1870, the House is a non-profit organization that currently runs only two federally funded programs. All the rest are funded by private donors. It was through the Erie House that Mai and Quang were set up with their two American family sponsors: Quang with the village president of Oak Park, Mai with a family from Oak Park whose son was an attorney. "We saw the rainbow then," Quang remembered.

Asked to evaluate their second American sponsors, Quang and Mai reported extremely warm and positive experiences:

[Quang] What my sponsor did for me was more than what I could think of. So, it was really very nice. They try to teach me everything. They introduced me to the American society, to the other side--the nice side of the society. So, I really appreciated that. And through them I learned a lot. In fact, I moved in and lived with them in Oak Park. For nine months. My brother and I. He on Oak Park Avenue--on Oak Park and Augusta. Through them I learn a lot. I learn also not only the . . . family structure of the America, American people, I learn even their holidays, how they celebrate holidays, custom, and places, you know, everything. I learn mostly through them.

Quang was asked, "Did your sponsor give you monetary

support?"

[Quang] Indirectly. They gave me free home and food. That's worth more than anything.

[Mai] Especially their heart.

[Quang] But they treated me just like their own children, you know. That make me feel so happy. My brother and I live with them for quite a long time and I felt so much like home, and it did, I call them Mom and Dad. So, have a very close relationship develop with the family.

Mai was asked if her sponsors treated her as well as

Quang's treated him:

[Mai] No, I was at school at that time, but by sponsor try to take me every weekend, you know, to be with her during the weekend. And the same thing, she tried to, even only few days for the weekend, I have learned so much from her. Introduced American dinners because she said, "Oh, food at school, terrible. You should have come home with me to eat." And she was a good cook and she very friendly . . .

[Quang] Provided home-cook meal

[Mai] . . . and very gentle, and she try to, even she were self-employed, they worked, but they still saved some time for me. They took me everywhere. They took me to the airport. They took me when I went, I wanted to visit my parents, they took me to the airport.

Some of the cultural conflicts that affected the refugee sponsorship process have already been discussed. More materials have been published on the Vietnamese refugees since their arrival in 1975, but at first, information was scarce; neither Americans nor Vietnamese were prepared for each other's culture. Mai and Quang were asked, "Did you have any major cultural misunderstandings with your second sponsors?"

[Mai] With the sponsor, not specifically, but with the American people, yes. Like the way you want people to

come to you. This is for dog in Vietnam, not for people. [Mai signaled with her finger as if beckoning someone to come closer.]

[Quang] You don't call people by using your finger. Not very respectable.

[Mai] Impolite. Hand is for, what-you-call, for parent, you know, to put on child's head. You put the highest people, the most respected people above the others.

[Quang] It is custom. You cannot explain, sometime you cannot explain.

[Mai] With the sponsor, she, they know we are, we were new here, so they taught us.

Matters of non-verbal communication, food habits, cleanliness, concepts of time, principles of friendship, dress, and living conditions all differed in varying degrees from Vietnamese to American culture. Yet Quang's and Mai's memory of cultural misunderstandings, or their reticence to discuss them, elicited only the above concern.

The American University

On the verge of receiving their law degrees from the University of Saigon when they evacuated from Vietnam in 1975, Mai and Quang were faced with the prospect of beginning college again when they reached the United States. Markedly different from the higher education in Vietnam, American higher education posed both problems and delights to the new refugees. Prior to discovering the impact the American university had on the refugees in this study, it was important to discern what motivated them to return to school in the first place. Traditionally, immigrants and

refugees had sought employment as soon as they entered the country; although it is true, as Dinnerstein and Reimers note, that hard-working immigrants were able to climb the social ladder without education because "accomplishments in many businesses were achieved at a time when education was not as necessary as it would later become."¹¹ Both Mai and Quang were asked to explain why they chose to attend a university instead of seeking employment during their first year in the United States:

[Quang] Because at that time I think if I apply for the job, nobody would hire me because I couldn't speak English very well that time, and then everybody suggested, even my sponsor, that the best way to get a job is to get an education.

[Mai] Yea, that's why I went to school too, and get a degree . . . Also, I knew I need a skill, o.k., to get a good job. I didn't want just any job, you see.

Their reasons for insisting on returning to school fell in line with the findings reached by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in a four-year study from 1975 to 1979. Surveying a total of 555 Vietnamese refugees in the southern and western United States, the study concluded, among other things, that

a number of well-educated refugees also participated in American education. For some of them, participation may have been seen as a means of revalidating and adapting to American requirements their educational achievements. Basically, it is refugees with some education who seek more education here, either because they value it or because others do not have the qualifications to enter

¹¹ Dinnerstein and Reimers, Ethnic Americans, p. 118.

the educational system.¹²

Most importantly, the Lys--either because of their own innate Vietnamese respect for education or their adopted American respect for education--understood the correlation between a good education and a good job. In Quang's words, ". . . the best way to get a job is to get an education" and in Mai's, ". . . I knew I need a skill, o.k., to get a good job. I didn't want just any job, you see."

The Lys both attended Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago in the fall of 1975. Quang had a Vietnamese friend who had been attending that University first, paving the way for other Vietnamese students. By living in a large urban area, the Lys were fortunate to have contact with a significant number of other Vietnamese. The earliest HEW figures on Indochina refugee distribution became available in December, 1976. At that time, Illinois ranked eighth in the nation for serving the Indochinese refugee population, welcoming 4,675 refugees (California was host to the largest number, serving 30,495; Texas was second with 11,136, and Pennsylvania was third with 8,187).¹³ More detailed figures on refugee location in Illinois were unavailable until 1979 when Dr. Young Kim, working with the

¹²Survey of the Social, Psychological and Economic Adaptation of Vietnamese Refugees in the U.S., 1975-1979 (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1982), p. 18.

¹³HEW Task Force, Report to the Congress (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Health Education and

Refugee Resettlement Program, reported that one-half (53%) of the total number of Indochinese households were located in Cook County. The majority of the Cook County residents were living in the City of Chicago, which comprised 44% of the total Indochinese population in Illinois.¹⁴ One could assume then that a significant number of the Indochinese refugee population in Illinois had relocated to the Chicagoland area fairly early in the resettlement process. Employment and educational opportunities as well as sponsorships were more abundant in the urban centers than the rural communities. Furthermore, the proximity to sizable numbers of other Indochinese refugees would naturally be attractive.

The help Quang's Vietnamese friend gave him and Mai in entering the American university was immeasurable: "We learn about credits, how Northeastern would accept all the credit from Saigon--tuition, housing, the entire system from him," Quang said. In an earlier session, Mai had written that

We brought proof of papers with us. We could not bring much from Vietnam with us, but we bring important papers from school. These help us to get into the American university.

With little more than a day or two's notice, the Nguyens and

Welfare, 1976), p. 19.

¹⁴Young Yun Kim, Survey of Indochinese Refugees: Introduction, Summary and Recommendations (Chicago: Illinois Department of Public Aid, 1980), p. 8.

the Lys had had the foresight to send with their children, among a precious few other things, their school records. Many other refugees were not as fortunate to 1) have a friend who had led the way into an American university, and 2) have brought with them the records and transcripts so vitally important in facilitating placement of the foreign student.

Once placed at Northeastern with junior-level standing, Quang studied political science, Mai studied English. They were asked, "Why did you not choose to study law as you had in Vietnam?"

[Mai] Oh, we were thinking about it so much.

[Quang] I thought about it, and I decide not to pursue it, because I would have to go back to law school and study all over again, you see, because the laws that I studied in Vietnam were not relevant here.

[Mai] We have different system.

[Quang] Different law system. And the law is created by a society, a group of people, according to their custom, their living, and their style. . . . it's not relevant here. And if I go back to law school, you know, I have to study all over again, and that would take a long, long time, and very costly, too. So, I decided not to pursue.

Instead, Quang had chosen political science because it was "close to my law interest and it tell me a lot about the American society." Mai had chosen to study English because she felt it was the best and surest way to gain command of her new language and culture. Their work in law school at the University of Saigon was accepted as elective credit. Some of their general education requirements were waived as

well.

Under the best of circumstances, foreign students experience some problems in adjusting to the American educational system. It was important in this research to discern what difficulties the Vietnamese refugee subjects had in coping with their educational experience. On the other hand, it was equally important to discover what aspects of American education they determined to be most beneficial to them. Throughout their informal discussions, their responses to prepared questions, and in their writing, the Lys brought up several anticipated problems with American education and one very unexpected advantage in the Vietnamese perspective.

The problems these two particular Vietnamese students experienced with their American university occurred because of 1) language difficulties, 2) cultural differences, 3) inadequate background for some subjects, and 4) teacher-student roles. First and foremost, the linguistic barriers that existed between the Vietnamese students and their American instructors and fellow-students caused confusion for all. It was often quite difficult to know what information was being learned and what was not. Because Quang and Mai, like most of their Vietnamese colleagues, were polite and industrious students, their American instructors often did not know if they were truly grasping the material or merely shaking their heads in

polite agreement. "At first our English so bad, even though we study in Vietnam," Mai explained, "Our teachers there [in Vietnam] were Vietnamese, of course, so we were not familiar with American accent speaking English." Although both Quang and Mai took English as a Second Language courses at Northeastern, they perceived their oral skills to be often inadequate in the fast-paced American classroom. It is difficult to distinguish how much of the problem was due to insufficient linguistic skills and how much to an inadequate background in some subjects.

Both Quang and Mai brought up instances when their lack of Western history and culture posed difficulties in the classroom. Mai related experiences she had in her English class when the students and instructors would be laughing at a story or a joke someone had told, and Mai would laugh too, "Even though I didn't know what they were laughing about," she admitted. "Gradually, you begin to understand more and more, though." For Quang, in his political science courses, his Vietnamese nationality was an asset when American involvement in Southeast Asia was discussed: "I would get asked a lot of questions. Sometimes I couldn't talk in English all the things I could say. It was very frustrating." Other topics such as the U.S. Constitution or the Monroe Doctrine posed greater challenges. Quang admitted that his knowledge of American politics and history was weak:

[In Vietnam] when we study about America, we learned that it is a very rich country, rich in resources, and natural resources. We learned about how large is the country, what the population, and what kind of main religious product for a group of people. We didn't learn much about politics. We learned about government structure and how it works and who has what kind of power, what branch of government and so, but we did not, you know, learn the Monroe Doctrine.

Inextricably bound, language and culture posed the greatest barriers for the Vietnamese refugee students, just as they have for most other refugees and immigrants throughout history.

The effect student-teacher roles had on the learning process of the Vietnamese student has already been discussed somewhat earlier in this study. The informality of the student-teacher relationship not only surprised the Lys, but the relative lack of respect American students showed their professors angered the Lys as well: "Sometimes I feel so, you know, a little angry when I see the student talking back in a rude way to the instructor, and I don't feel that's right at all, no matter what . . ." Quang had said. Used to a much more structured and formal system where the teacher was like, if not superior, to the father, the Vietnamese students were shocked by the rudeness of the student and the informality of the instructor. Asked if this aspect of American education affected their learning, Mai replied: "Yes and no. We were disturbed and upset, but we still do our studies and learn despite this difference."

Quang made one other observation regarding his

American instructors:

Some of them were afraid of foreign student because they thought us--because of the language barrier, so sometime they just help us privately, I mean, tutoring us, you know--give us more time to study. Most of them, they very understanding, the teachers--especially to the Vietnamese refugee at that time, because everybody knows about the Vietnamese refugee.

Perhaps as interesting as his perception of the American instructors' "fear" of the foreign student was Quang's observation that "they very understanding . . . especially to the Vietnamese refugee . . . because everybody knows about the Vietnamese refugee." In his perception of the situation in 1975, Quang felt that Americans knew of the refugees' plight and were understanding of their needs. Coupled with his opinion, stated earlier, that Americans established refugee camps because they felt guilty about letting South Vietnam fall to the Communists, this remark tends to validate a feeling that was common among Vietnamese refugees: the over-expectation that "Americans feel guilty about the war. They will welcome [Vietnamese refugee] and will give them what they need."¹⁵

There was, of course, a great deal of sympathy towards the Vietnamese refugee after the war, and to be fair probably a perceptible guilt permeated many American consciences. Yet, the gestalt of the American public after the war in Vietnam was incredibly complex, mixing guilt and

¹⁵Center for Applied Linguistics, Social Adaptation of Refugees: A Guide for Service Providers (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1982), p. 8.

shame with bitterness and anger. If American soldiers returning from the war received an ambivalent welcome--if any welcome at all--the Vietnamese themselves were hardly in the position to be welcomed with open arms by everyone they met. Professors at a university, however, probably were more understanding to their Vietnamese students than they would be to their Iranian students four years later in 1979. United States political relations were bound to affect American attitudes and behaviors towards refugees and immigrants.

From the Vietnamese perspective, one unexpected advantage of the American higher education system was its flexible structure which allowed students to earn credits in given areas on a cumulative basis rather than forcing them to earn an entire degree. This perceived advantage represented one of the main differences between American and Vietnamese (and European) university systems. The Lys were asked the questions, "What did you think about the American university? How did it differ from the University of Saigon?"

[Quang] Beautiful.

[Mai] Yea, I like it very much.

[Quang] I have to say the American university is beautiful. I like the system here. Let me explain. In Vietnam, our school system go by calendar year--one year in row, no break. So you don't have the quarter or the semester. And after you through with one year study, then you have the exam at the end of the year, for all of the subjects that you studied in that year. For example, when I went to law school, I have like twelve

subjects I took in one academic year. At the end of the year, I have to pass the exam, 12 exam to get into the second level, to next level. And if I fail just one of the 12, I go back and study the whole year again. So that what I didn't like about the system. So when I come over here and went to the school here and saw accumulative grades, it's so much better for me, the credit system. You earn each credit, each term, add up, add up 'til you graduate.

[Mai] . . . can study forever! We just earn the credit and then we can get whatever we want.

[Quang] And then if you take three of four classes, you fail one, you still o.k., you retake it, you don't fail the whole thing.

[Mai] Yea, but really, we like it very much.

[Quang] Over there you have no choice. Whatever they teach you have to take. And you have to pass all of them at once. . . . they give you exam at the end of the year for the whole year you study, so you must have good memory, you know, to pass all the exam, and if you fail one exam, you fail whole year.

The concept of earning credit, adding credits on top of credits, from the Vietnamese perspective was a delight beyond reason. Mai was, in fact, almost exhilarated when she interjected, ". . . can study forever! We just earn the credit and then we can get whatever we want." The rainbow had appeared, at least momentarily, for the two refugees. The rich land of opportunity became a reality at the university after the trials of the refugee camp sponsorship and the Uptown area of Chicago. That a college education could be earned in such a simple fashion was, unquestionably, one of the most positive things to happen so far to these Vietnamese refugees.

CHAPTER V

ADJUSTMENT, UPWARD MOBILITY, AND ACCEPTANCE

WHAT I LEAVE TO MY SON

by Du Tu Le

No point in leaving you a long list
of those who have died:
Even if I limit it to my friends and your uncles
it won't do. Who could remember them all?
My son, isn't it true?
The obituaries leave me indifferent
as the weather. Sometimes they seem to matter
even less: How can that be, my son?

I'll leave you, yes,
a treasure I'm always seeking, never finding.
Can you guess? Something wondrous,
something my father wanted for me
although (poor man!) it's been nothing
but a mirage in the desert of my life.
My soul will join his now, praying
that your generation may find it--
simply peace--
simply a life better than ours
where you and your friends won't be forced
to drag grief-laden feet down the road
to mutual murder.

from A Thousand Years of Vietnamese Poetry,
edited by Ngoc Bich

Employment

Nine years after they left Saigon, Mai Nguyen and Quang Ly were married, had two daughters, and lived in a two-bedroom apartment in one of Chicago's western suburbs.

Their daughters, Anne and Lynn, were four and two years old. Both attended day care classes in town as their mother and father both had full-time jobs. Anne, the eldest, spoke fluent English without a trace of accent. She also understood and spoke Vietnamese as well. Lynn, the two-year-old, was just learning her languages. Like her sister, she would be bilingual someday. "We want them to know their language and culture," Mai had explained, "someday we may be able to go back to Vietnam."

In 1977, after graduating from Northeastern, Mai and Quang were married. Quang got a job with the United States Department of Public Aid, as a case worker to help in the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees. His own experience, coupled with his bilingual skills and newly earned bachelor's degree, made him well-qualified for the position. Mai was hired as a tutor through a C.E.T.A. grant at a local community college. Although her spoken English was weak, her knowledge of the rules of the written language was superb. She worked well, at first tutoring English as a second language to foreign students. Later she gained enough confidence and skill to work with American students.

Employment for the two refugees was obtained through the help of Quang's sponsor, who suggested they apply at the U.S. Department of Public Aid, not for relief this time, but to work to assist more recent Vietnamese refugee arrivals. Quang's job as a case worker was not actually his first job.

Before he became a student at Northeastern, he worked for ten days in the packing department at the Playskool factory on the west side of Chicago, and then at Marshall Field's as a stock boy. It was at this time that Quang and Mai met their new sponsors and soon became enrolled as full-time students.

In a 1979 survey of 2,876 Indochinese households in Illinois, 62% of the respondents were employed full-time. The majority of the employed respondents were working as laborers, comprising 36% of the total respondents; 4% of the total were employed as office workers.¹ While Quang and Mai were part of an elite minority of Indochinese refugees in the State of Illinois in terms of their employment status (according to Kim's study), interestingly enough they fell into the mainstream employment pattern of such refugees in California, Texas, and Louisiana. In a study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human services covering the period from 1975 to 1979 and sampling 555 subjects, the following conclusion was drawn:

First job occupations among male refugees most frequently involved service occupations, followed by structural occupations--often in the assembly, repair or installation of electronic equipment--and professional, technical and managerial occupations. Women were most frequently employed in bench-work occupations--often in the fabrication of textile goods--followed by professional, technical and managerial occupations--most often in education or administrative specializations--

¹ Kim, Survey of Indochinese Refugees, p. 13.

and then by clerical and structural occupations.²

Quang and Mai, as a case worker and a tutor, fell neatly into these mainstream employment patterns.

What was, however, overwhelmingly characteristic of Vietnamese refugee employment in the United States, particularly among the well-educated first wave of refugees, was the great amount of underemployment. David Montero's 1977 survey of 2,817 refugees across the United States dramatically revealed this:

Results . . . reveal that there has been a considerable amount of downward mobility for Vietnamese heads of household. Of the 319 Vietnamese who held white-collar jobs in Vietnam, more than six in ten (60.6 percent) now hold blue-collar jobs. The remaining hold white-collar jobs, with a plurality occupying clerical and sales positions. The data indicate that there has been considerable downward mobility among the professionals.³

Although the two Vietnamese in this study were not employed professionals in Vietnam prior to coming to the United States, both their fathers were professionals and both Quang and Mai were preparing to become attorneys. That two students on the verge of obtaining their law degrees would, in two years' time, be re-educated and employed as a case worker and a tutor was certainly indicative of downward mobility, despite the extenuating circumstances.

From 1977 to 1984, Quang worked full-time in Chicago for the United States Department of Public Aid. Mai worked

² Adaptation of Vietnamese Refugees, p. 11.

³ Montero, Patterns of Resettlement, p. 39.

at the college full-time; when the C.E.T.A. grant ended, the college hired her full-time. In 1980 she took a leave of absence for the birth of their first daughter. After a one-year leave, she returned to the college to tutor on a part-time basis in the evenings until 1982, when her second daughter was born.

Driven by "the desire for a better life," as Quang had written, both he and Mai returned to Northeastern in 1982 on a part-time basis in the evenings to obtain their second bachelors' degrees, this time in computer science. Mai was asked how she attended school with two young children at home:

We both attended similar classes. So sometimes I don't go to class and Quang take all the notes for me. The teachers know this and say it's o.k. They very nice.

In May of 1984, after having studied part-time in the evenings for two years, both Quang and Mai received their second bachelor's degree from Northeastern. Even before they officially graduated they had applied for and obtained new full-time jobs: Quang as a computer analyst for Hart, Schaffner, and Marx in Chicago, and Mai as a data processing trainer for Speigel in Oakbrook. Mai started at a salary of \$21,000 a year, Quang at \$29,000.

Three issues relevant to the Vietnamese refugee situation were raised: first, the decision to return to college to seek training in computer science, secondly, the perception the subjects had towards their new socio-economic

status, and finally, the effect the working wife and mother had on the Vietnamese family.

The decision to return to school, on the one hand, was characteristic of Vietnamese behavior in that the key to upward social mobility has always been education. What was less characteristic was the desire to change jobs in the first place. Not only do many Vietnamese show what Nhu and others have pointed out to be a lack of aggressive, "goal-or-success-oriented" behavior,⁴ but they also tend to be very loyal to their employer.

In Vietnam, often a Vietnamese would work for the same firm or same employer for all of his or her life. He or she becomes a part of "the family." In the United States this tendency is reflected in the reluctance to change jobs and to move ahead.⁵

When asked why they went back to school to study computer science, Mai responded matter-of-factly:

Oh, because this is a computerized age, society. Everything computerized, and within that, if we get into that field, we have a better chance, and that was the reason. And I like that [computers], too.

For Quang, it was quite simply, "the decision for a better life." Not stating directly that they were displeased with their first employers, the Lys, nevertheless, left their secure jobs for better-paying jobs with more opportunities for advancement. Simply by answering advertisements in the

⁴Nhu, "Trauma of Exile," p. 61.

⁵Tam Thi Dang Wei, A Handbook for Teachers of Vietnamese Refugee Students (np: Illinois Governor's Information Center for Asian Assistance, 1979), p. 19.

Chicago Tribune, they applied for, interviewed for, and obtained new jobs within a two-month period. An upwardly-mobile step, their taking new jobs in computer fields at prestigious companies advanced the two Vietnamese refugees beyond their contemporary counterparts and far beyond most other first generation refugees and immigrants who have come to the United States. Yet, were these jobs now equivalent to the kind of employment they would have had in Vietnam had circumstances been different?

[Quang] Would I have done a computer job in Vietnam? No, I don't think I would go into the computer field in Vietnam because you see, if I in the law field I would make a much better living, you know . . .

[Mai] Because with our degrees in law, we went to law school, we would be attorneys . . .

[Quang] It would not be the same job that we have here. It would be something else.

Although most Americans would view their educational, social, and economic advancement as extraordinarily successful, they Lys themselves had a different perception of their status:

[Quang] If we were in Vietnam right now, not under Communist, I would say we would have a better social position than here. Certainly, we would have a house, some servants, better jobs, life easier.

[Mai] Not real big house, but I'm sure I would have a maid to do the dishes.

Mai paused, then added:

I think we have nothing to complain because everybody have the same style, which mean that you have to work every day, you know, from dawn to night, and then you have only the weekends to do everything, you know, the house, the kids, . . . Here life is so difficult. You

don't have much time to enjoy, really.

Mai was asked if she felt just the Vietnamese refugee had to work so hard or if it were Americans as well who had to work so relentlessly: "Oh, it everybody. Americans too, but I feel the refugee have to work harder because we start with nothing."

Perceiving their own meteoric socio-economic rise as taking them to a level substantially lower than what they would have attained as attorneys in Vietnam, the Lys pictured life in America as generally quite demanding, but particularly so for the Vietnamese refugee. Life without a maid and working from dawn until night with only the weekends to do everything is a fact of life for most Americans. But for the Vietnamese refugee coming from an upper-middle/upper-class status, this way of life was extremely uninviting. Mai's complaint that "You don't have much time to enjoy, really" is a common one of many foreigners living in the United States. The pace and demands of one of the richest, most technologically advanced and urbanized countries of the world would, under the best of circumstances, tax the nerves and stability of immigrants from slower-paced societies. However, the work load and pace, although partially self-imposed, nonetheless caused significant distress for the two Vietnamese refugees coming from a genteel background in a war-torn Asian country.

That a Vietnamese woman from Mai's social class

would work at all was worth questioning and exploring. In discussing the role of the Vietnamese woman, the researcher found it important to question the husband and wife individually to discern their responses unaffected by each other's presence. They were subsequently questioned as a couple to compare their reactions with their individual responses. When questioned separately as to whether she would have worked in Vietnam, Mai responded: "Oh yes. I would work in Vietnam after my law degree. I would be an attorney and travel and do many things." Mai immediately qualified this liberated view:

Yet, I still am very Vietnamese, o.k., more traditional than American women. I talk to Quang all the time, tell him everything. I ask him if I can do this or that thing. I very traditional.

More specifically, would she have worked after she had gotten married?

I think so, yes, because I would be attorney. I may stop to have children for a while, but I work at least part-time for a while. If my job good with good pay, maybe not. Not so many women work in Vietnam as American. I don't have to work there--you see difference?

Quang, too, was asked--in a session when Mai was not present--if Mai would have worked in Vietnam: "If she my wife, never. My family and friends would think I am too poor to support her . . . No, I could not see her working at all." Would she have worked before they got married?

"Maybe yes, before, but definitely not after" was Quang's response.

When asked separately if the wife would work outside the home in a Vietnamese marriage, Quang and Mai differed markedly in their responses. Mai indicated that she would definitely work after graduation, and most probably after getting married, although she might quit to have children. Two key ideas were involved. First, although she would work, she was still far more traditional than the American woman. Traditional, according to Mai, meant open communication between her husband and her as well as her asking his permission "to do this or that thing." Secondly, while she could have, would have, or may have, worked in Vietnam, she did not have to work there after marriage as she felt impelled to do here. Quang, on the other hand, indicated quite definitely that were they living in Vietnam, his wife would never work. An affront against his social class as well as his role as a husband, his wife working in Vietnam would be totally unacceptable to him.

Several weeks later, when they were together, Mai and Quang were again questioned about their feelings towards the working Vietnamese wife. They were asked: If you were living in Vietnam, would Mai be working? Their response, their effect on each other, and their interplay are all quite revealing in the following discussion:

[Quang] I don't think so.

[Mai] No, but because with my degree . . .

[Quang] I don't think so.

[Mai] I want, no, you don't think so, but I want to try . . .

[Quang] That bring the argument between husband and wife sometime in Vietnam. To the Vietnamese man, if he let his wife go out to work it shows he unsuccessful. You see. That mean he cannot make enough money to cover all the needs for his family. That why his wife have to go to work. That's why the other guys' wives stay home, why my wife have to go out to work. You see so the girl, the women, in Vietnam go to school to have high education for herself, you know, to be, to behave, you know, to have this and that, but not for the purpose of working. You see, maybe for the purpose of educating children after work. You see, but, if--she may change later on, but after my generation, I still feel that way--that if we were in Vietnam right now I wouldn't let Mai go out to work, unless I don't have enough money to feed my family, then I have to accept that.

[Mai] But I don't think so . . . because I go to school and went to get a degree and practice to be a lawyer or to work with my majors in public law so I can, with the state department, so I can travel if I want, but he is telling the truth because that's what a man thinks about a woman's role in Vietnam. They want a woman to stay home all the time . . . I'd work. But when I marry maybe he, my husband . . .

[Quang] She would like to do that herself, but after marriage, who knows, she may have to obey her husband . . .

[Mai] Or maybe not.

[Quang] Or she may just argue and do her own way and we're gonna have a big problem there.

The role of the working wife was clearly a point of contention for this Vietnamese refugee couple. Yet, it was impossible to determine how much or to what extent Mai's attitude was a result of her exposure to western society and western women's working habits. Quang's attitude, on the other hand, was reminiscent of traditional Vietnamese thought which placed the woman primarily in a domestic,

subservient role.

It has only been recently, towards the middle of the twentieth century, that Vietnamese women have been given a more prominent role in society. Even the gains made by women in Vietnam in the twentieth century have been mitigated by ingrained religious, social, and psychological beliefs which have encouraged women to defer to men. In the Analects of Confucius, women's plight is established:

The master said women and people of very low birth are very hard to deal with. If you are friendly with them, they get out of⁶ hand; and if you keep your distance, they resent it.

The letter of the Master's law was not observed, but clearly many vestiges of the spirit were prevalent in Quang's attitude towards his wife. His dominance of the conversation, his frequent interruptions of his wife's responses, and his dogmatism tend to indicate that even if a Vietnamese wife had the education, expertise, and desire to work in Vietnam, her husband may inhibit, if not prohibit, her working outside the home.

If Quang were so adamantly opposed to his wife working, were they living in Vietnam, how did he resolve the fact that she was working now in the United States:

[Quang] Everything different here. My job, the house, Mai working. It is a different society completely. You cannot compare . . . Mai works like many American women work.

⁶ Confucius, Analects, quoted in Hammer, Vietnam: Yesterday and Today, p. 234.

Unlike his wife, Quang would never admit that Mai had to work in the United States in order for the family to maintain a particular lifestyle. She worked here because "everything different here . . . many American women work." Now that Mai--like Quang himself--had completed a second, very marketable, bachelor's degree and subsequently obtained a new, well-paying job, there was little possibility that she would refrain from working. Like it or not, his wife, whether out of her own independent personality or her full-fledged adoption of the American working woman's ethic, was determined to be a successful career woman in the United States.

Housing

The Lys had been living in a two-bedroom apartment in a western Chicago suburb. They had lived in this same apartment since they had been married in 1977. In addition to their two daughters who shared one bedroom, Quang's grandmother, Mrs. Pham, intermittently lived with them.

Despite three adults and two young children living in the small apartment, it was extremely clean and orderly. On the bare wooden floor the children's numerous toys and stuffed animals were piled neatly near the coffee table. The living room was furnished with a T.V. a stereo, a couch, several chairs, and a few plants. The apartment was decorated with American furniture and ornaments. The only trace of their Indochinese heritage could be seen in the

photographs on the tables and hanging on the walls. On frequent occasions, the only other hint of their heritage emanated from the smells of lunch or dinner cooking, smells of garlic and pungent fish sauce which were unmistakably from a different land.

The apartment was striking only in its cleanliness, its orderliness, and its inexplicable spaciousness. Even when the Lys hosted a party at their apartment, twenty people were comfortable dining from a Vietnamese buffet or singing American and Vietnamese songs with Quang as he and his brother played guitars.

In January 1985 the Lys were moving to a house they had bought in a far western suburb. The bi-level house was ten years old, with three bedrooms, a garage, a kitchen, dining room, living room, bathroom, and basement. Quang explained with pride:

It's in a good neighborhood, with good schools, away from crime and pollution. It's farther from my job in Chicago, but close to Mai's in Oakbrook . . . we very happy.

Ten years after they had come to the United States as refugees, they Lys were moving to their first house in the Chicago suburbs. They were both thirty-three years old.

Fitting neatly into an Illinois state-wide pattern, the Lys had upgraded their living conditions dramatically:

The housing status of the Indochinese refugees improved over time: the proportion of the refugees with their own homes or condominiums steadily increased from only 2% of the first-year residents to 27% of the fifth-year residents. At the same time, the proportion of

households living in rented apartments or⁷ rented houses decreased over the years from 93% to 69%.

Conscious of their upward mobility, Mai said with glee, "We just got a new microwave oven for our new house, too!" True to form, however, whenever she spoke of her own good fortune, Mai immediately, though momentarily, became depressed and lamented the fate of her sister who remained in Vietnam: "I feel so bad to have so much, and her children there so skinny, so sick." The inevitable guilt, perhaps mingled with homesickness, emerged when Mai spoke of her good life in America.

Three Generations

In Culture and Education, Lawrence Stenhouse wrote that "sociologists commonly conceive the function of education as the transmission of culture from generation to generation."⁸ What happens to the educational process when that transmission breaks down as in the case of the Vietnamese refugees? What culture is taught, what culture is learned, and to what extent?

The Ly family became a particularly valuable case study in that three different generations could be observed: thirty-three-year-old Quang and Mai, their eighty-year-old grandmother, and their two children, aged four and two. how

⁷ Kim, Survey of Indochinese Refugees, p. 15.

⁸ Lawrence Stenhouse, Culture and Education (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1967), p. 1.

and what each generation learned differed profoundly among the family members. Because much has been reported on the thirty-three-year-olds, the most articulate of the family members, they will be discussed here only as they compare to the other two generations.

Quang's grandmother, Mrs. Pham, was eighty years old. She lived with Quang and Mai for several months of the year; for the remainder of the year she lived with Quang's eldest brother's family in Michigan. Mrs. Pham was four feet, eleven inches tall, quite thin, and when she smiled, she revealed a set of gleaming black teeth. She always wore Vietnamese-style clothing, and her grey hair was always pulled back tightly into a chignon. Although she spoke no English, she watched soap operas on T.V. every day while Quang and Mai were at work. When Mai did have a day off work, she would translate the soap operas to her husband's grandmother. "She doesn't understand a word they say," Mai said, "but she knows every single character and what they're doing."

Mrs. Pham had been a beautiful, rich, and influential woman in Vietnam. Her husband had been a governor over three provinces in South Vietnam. Her home, a mansion, had been staffed with over one hundred servants. Did she want to come to the United States with her children and grandchildren? Mai translated: "She hated Communist so she must come, but she didn't want to leave her home. She

also must be with her children." Did she like America? "Oh yes. It's a nice country, very rich."

Later, Mai and Quang discussed his grandmother's coming to the United States:

[Quang] It very hard on her, but we cannot leave her. Besides, she sick about Communist coming into Vietnam.

[Mai] It very hard on all the old people. They don't want to leave their country, their home. But, they have no choice with the Communist. They would die there. We, our parents, tell them that.

Asked if Mrs. Pham had tried to learn English, Mai and Quang responded:

[Quang] In the refugee camp she go to class a little, but she quit. It was too much for her.

[Mai] I don't think she want to learn English very much. She say it not worth it at this point. Yet she very healthy . . .

[Quang] She cannot, she won't learn English now.

Like many of the older Vietnamese refugees, eighty-year-old Mrs. Pham resigned herself to coming to the United States with her family. Despite her resignation to venture to a new country when she was seventy, she would not give up her customs, her language, her religion, or her culture. Like many refugees and immigrants to the United States before her, Mrs. Pham lived in as isolated a world as she could, dressing, eating, speaking, and thinking as she would have were she living in her native country. At her age, she had earned that privilege, however. Her children and grandchildren would have to worry about supporting her as she once had supported them. Her only venture into her new

foreign culture was through the safe world of soap operas on the television.

If Mrs. Pham were adamant in her refusal to become a part of American society, her great-grandchildren were equally adamant in embracing its language and culture. Just four and two years old, Anne and Lynn epitomized American childhood. Who was their favorite singer? "Michael Jackson," they screamed. What was their favorite food? "McDonald's hamburgers." What did Anne want to be when she grew up? "A computer programmer."

Mrs. Pham always wore traditional Vietnamese dress: the ao-dai, an over-dress, form-fitting to the waist with long tight sleeves. At the waist, two panels extended front and back to cover long trousers underneath. Mai and Quang often mixed Vietnamese with western clothing: a Vietnamese blouse or shirt over blue jeans with tennis shoes. The children, on the other hand, were always dressed in American clothes. Did the children ever wear Vietnamese clothing?

[Mai] For practical reasons, no. They are very difficult to find. Also, I want the children to fit in with the rest of the children at day care.

[Quang] We want them to dress, to talk, to know, to behave like Americans. They got to fit in because they are Americans now and, um, they got to live here maybe a long time--their whole life, who knows?

Not wanting to isolate their children from their new culture, Mai and Quang encouraged them to fit into American society, mainly for practical reasons--Vietnamese clothes were hard to find and the children were, after all,

going to have to live here--and for philosophical reasons-- the children were considered to be American, not Vietnamese, by their parents.

Clothing was one indicator of the three generations' knowledge and acceptance of their new culture. The degree to which the three generations were assimilated was almost perfectly symbolized in their dress. While Mrs. Pham always wore traditional Vietnamese garb, Mai and Quang mixed Vietnamese with American styles, and the children almost exclusively wore American outfits.

Like their clothing, their command of the English language also revealed quite dramatically their knowledge and acceptance of American culture. Eighty-three-year-old Mrs. Pham spoke, read, understood, and wrote no English with the exception of one word, "hello." Not wanting or needing to be a part of American life, she perceived no use in learning the language. On the other had, thirty-three-year-old Mai and Quang spoke, read, understood, and wrote English fluently. Their English was spoken with strong Vietnamese accents, and it was affected by Vietnamese grammar and syntax. Nonetheless, their English skills were strong enough to help them land well-paying, responsible, managerial positions. Finally, four-year-old Anne and two-year-old Lynn were in varying stages of acquiring their language skills. Anne spoke English without a trace of an accent or any Vietnamese-influenced grammatical mistakes.

Mai said with mixed pride and aggravation, "She corrects my English all the time." Two-year-old Lynn was learning her English, and the words she knew were spoken as fluently as her sister's.

In addition to their English, Anne and Lynn understood Vietnamese as well, for their parents spoke Vietnamese to them at home. However, when Americans were present, for the most part, Mai and Quang out of courtesy spoke to their children in English. Asked why they wanted their children to know Vietnamese, the Lys responded:

[Mai] Vietnamese? We want them to know their background. I know they American, but their parents Vietnamese and we want them to know about their country.

[Quang] Also, I think it good for them. It easier for us too to speak with them in our own language.

[Mai] And someday maybe if U.S.-Vietnam relations get better, they can go back.

Again, for practical reasons--it was simply easier to speak to them in Vietnamese--and for philosophical reasons--to know their heritage and to be able to communicate should they have the opportunity to return--the Lys taught their children Vietnamese. Although the children were learning spoken Vietnamese, they were not methodically learning written Vietnamese. Like the children of many immigrant families, they would learn the spoken but not the written language: learning an oral language as a child is an innately human and natural process, while learning to read and write takes years of training and practice.

One other aspect of the three generations' acceptance of their new culture was indicated by their circle of friends. As could be expected, Mrs. Pham had no American friends or acquaintances. She surrounded herself with her family and her family's close Vietnamese friends. The majority of Mai and Quang's friends were Vietnamese, although they did have several American friends from college, from work, and through their sponsors. American friends were often present at the Lys parties and social gatherings. For Anne and Lynn, friends were established from the neighborhood and the day care center. The majority of their friends were American, although they did have several Vietnamese friends, primarily the children of their parents' friends.

Dress, language, and friendship were three of the more perceptible indicators of cultural acceptance that the three generations in the Ly family exhibited. That the youngest generation would be most accepting of the new culture, the eldest least accepting, and the middle in a complex transition state is not surprising. It was clear that ten years of life in the United States would suffice to distinguish those refugees who would and would not adjust to or accept their new culture.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I think being a refugee make us better human beings, that's all. You know, we have nothing to regret. It makes us strong. You see, for example, in 1975, we lost everything. We came here to redeem our life. So in the future, if something very unlucky happen again, we wouldn't be so afraid anymore. You see, because we passed that stage already, the worst stage.

Quang Ly
January 8, 1985

The Future

Several weeks before the Lys were to move from their small apartment to their first house, they announced that they had been accepted at De Paul University to begin work on their master's degrees in computer science. Not only would the education provide them with better job opportunities in the future, but the companies employing them currently had offered them full tuition reimbursement.

[Mai] Everything happen this month. We move to the new house. I got a new microwave and Quang and I get accepted at De Paul.

For ten months, throughout the course of this research, the Lys had been questioned about their past and their feelings on their present status. Now they were asked

to speculate on the future, a difficult task under ordinary circumstances, but particularly challenging for a family whose natural progression had been profoundly altered by war and emigration to a new country halfway around the world. Yet, they were asked to discuss the future in order to determine their level of commitment to their new life as well as to verify previous observations and findings on their level of adjustment. Among the responses they gave to questions about their future, those on their employment, their education, their children, and their possible return to Vietnam were the most revealing.

Questioned about the kind of employment they saw themselves having ten years in the future, Quang and Mai responded that they would stay with computers:

[Mai] Ten years in the future?

[Quang] Still computer-related job, for sure. 'Cause I don't plan to change my profession. We stay with this profession.

[Mai] Computers are very important in American life. And Quang and I, we like the job we do with computers. . . But we will go higher in the field. For Master's, and after that maybe we can go on in education.

[Quang] For the doctorate degree. Because school system here, as I said, very good. You earn credits and you can go to school forever.

[Mai] We like it very much.

If the Lys saw themselves pursuing their education indefinitely but continuing on in the computer field, what did they see in the future for their children? Asked what kind of hopes they had for Anne and Lynn, they replied:

[Quang] What kind of hope we have for our children? We hope that they have very good education. Whatever, however far they want to go.

[Mai] And have a career, yes.

[Quang] However high or far they want to go that we hope that we can support them.

[Mai] Yea, that's what we have to work on for them, not for us. That what we think for them.

[Quang] You see, our people do things for the next generation more than for the current generation, so what we build today is for the next generations, for our children.

[Mai] We want them to have a good education, and they will have a good career, you know, for themselves, to support themselves.

Just as for themselves, Quang and Mai wanted a good education as well as a successful career for their children. Interestingly, although the Vietnamese are known for their ancestor worship as well as the great respect they show towards their parents and grandparents, here it is their concern for the next generation that predominates. They work and strive not so much for the current generation, but for the next generation. It is a conscious and deliberate decision to work, not so much for one's self, but for one's children.

In their discussion of their children's future, two other interesting issues surfaced. First, Mai's repeated concern with her daughters' careers was characteristic of her determination for her own career. It is not coincidental that Quang only mentions his daughters' education, while Mai twice speaks of her daughters' careers.

and, moreover, their potential to support themselves. The male-female conflict was obvious once again here. Secondly, what was not mentioned was as important as what was.

Neither Mai nor Quang expressed hope that the children would be able to return to Vietnam either for a visit or to live. This omission can only be interpreted as a very positive sign that the Lys were more and more adjusted to and accepting of their life and the next generation's life in the United States.

During this session, the Lys talked about returning to Vietnam only when they were specifically asked. In earlier sessions, they had, frequently in fact, discussed the possibility of their returning to Vietnam or their childrens' returning; but as the year progressed, this topic became less and less prominent. At this point, when they were asked if they thought they would ever be able to return to Vietnam, they responded that they hoped and rationally believed it would be possible some day, although now they expressed more doubt:

[Quang] There will be a day when we can come back. That day will come when they, you know, there will be normal relationship between Vietnam government and Washington.

[Mai] We are hoping, we still . . .

[Quang] We still hope to come back, but, I don't know. When or how . . .

Planning for their own educational and employment advancement and preparing for their childrens' education and careers, the Lys had made dramatic adjustments to their life

in the United States. Ten years after their flight from Vietnam, their hopes of ever returning had become more subdued. It was not a sign of hopelessness or defeat but, on the contrary, a positive sign that the Lys were separating themselves mentally and emotionally from their native country to become more involved and concerned with the challenges their new life in the United States posed.

Summary

It was the purpose of this study to investigate the effectiveness of particular educational programs for the Vietnamese refugee based on an in-depth study of one Vietnamese family's ten-year experience with resettlement camps, English as a second language programs, college education, and college re-education in the United States. Care was taken to examine the success or failure of education for the refugee based on his understanding and assessment of it.

Five members of a Vietnamese extended family living in a Chicago suburb were interviewed and observed over a ten-month period in order to obtain the family's life history. Their life history was neither fiction nor autobiography, but a faithful rendering of their experiences as they perceived and defined the world from the Vietnamese refugee's understanding and interpretation of it. It was hoped that, to some extent, the subjects would represent a microcosm of the Vietnamese refugee group features.

Among 130,000 other Vietnamese, Mai Nguyen and Quang

Ly fled Vietnam with their families in April of 1975 only days before Communist troops marched through Saigon.

Travelling to the Philippines and Guam before reaching the United States, Mai and Quang first met at the Vietnamese refugee camp set up at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. Finding the facilities at Fort Chaffee clean and adequate compared to those set up for the Vietnamese refugee in Guam, Mai and Quang noted the lack of adequate orientation programs, English as a second language classes, and meaningful work or activity for the refugee. In the refugee camp they did however learn one very valuable lesson: how to stand in lines. Occasionally hurt and insulted by their American hosts' lack of knowledge of Vietnamese language and culture, Mai and Quang nonetheless were gracious newcomers, realizing that they were among the first refugees to arrive to a very unprepared and uncertain country. Already devastated by the loss of their homeland, Mai and Quang experienced further loss and separation when they were encouraged to split from their families as they were told that no American families would sponsor more than four Vietnamese together.

Asked to apply their experience and knowledge of the refugee camp by suggesting changes that could be implemented in a refugee camp in the future should the need arise for another population, Quang and Mai provided the following recommendations: 1) to process the refugees as quickly as

possible, 2) to provide them with more information on American life and culture, 3) to give the limited or non-English speaking refugees visual orientation to compensate for the significant language barriers, 4) to instruct the refugees on the most practical aspects of American life, and 5) to show them the negative, as well as the positive, aspects of life in America.

Sponsorship created a new set of challenges and opportunities for the two refugees. Sponsored as part of a group of young students by Catholic Charities, Mai and Quang, along with seventeen other young Vietnamese, were brought to Chicago. Resettled in the Uptown neighborhood with four to an apartment and told to apply for public aid, the refugees were alternately "scared to death" by the neighborhood and mortified at being asked to go on welfare. Threatening to turn to the local newspapers about their treatment, the refugees shortly thereafter were put in contact with the Erie Neighborhood House and eventually set up with American families. With their second American sponsors, two prominent families in Oak Park, Mai and Quang began a more comfortable and stable resettlement process. Experiencing extremely positive relationships with their American families, Mai and Quang established a strong bond with their adopted families that has lasted for ten years.

Encouraged by their families to return to college, the two Vietnamese students entered Northeastern Illinois

University to study English and political science. After they graduated with their bachelor's degrees, they married, rented an apartment in a western suburb, and obtained jobs as a case worker for the Illinois Department of Public Aid and a tutor at a community college. After five years and the birth of their two children, Quang and Mai returned to college again to study computer science. Two years later they received their second bachelor's degrees, these in computer science. Upon graduation, both Mai and Quang pursued and obtained new jobs, she as a data processing trainer at Spiegel, he as a computer analyst at Hart, Schaffner, and Marx.

In January of 1985, ten years after they arrived in the United States with nothing more than a few photographs of Vietnam, some school and personal records, and undaunted courage and determination, Quang and Mai were now preparing to move with their children into their first house, a three-bedroom bi-level in the suburbs. Holding managerial positions with excellent companies, the thirty-three-year-old Vietnamese refugees had just learned of their acceptance to graduate school in computer science at De Paul University. In a few months, their eldest daughter would begin kindergarten.

Conclusions

This study attempted to investigate the

effectiveness of particular educational programs for the Vietnamese refugee. From the in-depth case study presented here, the following conclusions were derived.

The speed with which the Communists captured South Vietnam left both the Vietnamese and the American people unprepared for the aftermath of war. For the Americans, dealing with the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees posed unexpected problems. The refugee camps set up for the first refugees who arrived in the spring of 1975, while meeting their physical needs, did little else to orient the war-weary Vietnamese to 20th-century American life. Despite a twenty-one year political and military involvement in Vietnam, few Americans knew anything about either the Vietnamese language or culture. Notwithstanding this lack of knowledge about a particular people and their culture, this study found that the camps failed to provide adequate English as a second language classes or even basic orientation programs about American culture.

The role sponsors played in the resettlement process of the Vietnamese refugees varied dramatically for even the extremely limited number of subjects in this study. An initial experience with Catholic Charities proved to be tremendously disappointing due to inadequate housing in a poor location as well as pressure to participate in the American welfare system. Misinterpreting the goals and, moreover, disregarding the self-respect this group of

refugees maintained created serious breaches of trust. Unquestionably Catholic Charities had attempted to help the newest refugee population that had arrived in the United States. Their good intentions, however, did not mitigate the fear the refugees felt in the rough Chicago neighborhood, nor did good intentions help the already frustrated refugees find jobs. Assuming the first Vietnamese refugees to be accustomed to rough urban settings and ready to participate in the welfare system, Catholic Charities had no idea that these refugees were sophisticated, educated, upper-middle-class Vietnamese who were extremely industrious and yearning for work.

Ironically, sponsorship also proved to be one of the most beneficial, sensible, and creative solutions to the Vietnamese refugee problem. Moved by the generosity of their second sponsors, Quang and Mai were re-oriented to a middle-class American life style, sent to school, and given a support system that helped them to prosper in America. Unlike previous immigrant populations, the Vietnamese had not established Vietnamese communities in the United States to which they could turn. Effective dispersal programs which distributed the Vietnamese among the fifty states further exacerbated the isolation of the refugee. The only saving grace for the Vietnamese refugee--besides his own tenacity--was the American sponsor. The success of an adequately matched refugee and sponsor cannot be stressed

enough.

The American higher education system, like sponsorship, was filled with problems and opportunities for the Vietnamese refugee. That the subjects of this study made the decision to return to school was, undoubtedly, the combined result of their sponsors' encouragement, their own Vietnamese respect for education, and the realization that good jobs would be obtained only after a good education was earned. Consequently, what distinguishes these refugees from many other immigrant and refugee groups was their drive to first be educated in the American system before they became settled in jobs.

Once enrolled at an American university, the subjects encountered the following problems: 1) language difficulties, 2) cultural differences, 3) inadequate background for some subjects, and 4) unfamiliar teacher-student roles. Their weak oral English skills, their different cultural orientation and knowledge, and their disappointment with the American teacher-student relationship initially posed the greatest problems for the refugees. What did, however, facilitate the learning process was the instructors' willingness to make allowances for the refugees and help them, and the flexible credit system, which did not require students to pass comprehensive exams at the end of each year.

Employment for the subjects of this study followed

national trends indicating that the Vietnamese refugees, particularly those among the well-educated first wave of refugees, were greatly underemployed. Experiencing considerable downward mobility, Quang and Mai, who were targeted to become attorneys in Vietnam, initially obtained jobs as a case worker and tutor after receiving their liberal arts bachelor's degrees in the United States. Their downward mobility cannot, however, be attributed solely to the fact that they were refugees. Caught in an economic recession in the mid-1970's, the United States was unable to employ many of its own native citizens. Further, with the swelling number of "baby boom" college graduates in the 1960's and 1970's, it was impossible to employ all young graduates in white-collar positions.

From the Vietnamese perspective, even their second, managerial, computer-related jobs were positions substantially lower than those Mai and Quang would have had had they been in a peaceful Vietnam. By their standards, they had experienced significant downward social mobility exemplified by their house, their lack of servants, their long working hours, and Mai's need to work. Although the husband and wife disagreed on the position of the working wife and mother, the conclusion can nevertheless be drawn that there was a significant difference between Mai's working in the United States and her working in Vietnam: in Vietnam, she felt at least, she did not have to work. In

the United States, she did. For Quang, the distinction was stronger: in Vietnam his wife would not work at all. In the United States she worked because everything was different here.

The extent to which three different generations of Vietnamese refugees adapted to and accepted their new American culture could be seen in the language, appearance, and behavior of the members of the Ly family. The eldest member of the family, eighty-year-old Mrs. Pham, not surprisingly maintained a tight hold on her Vietnamese language, dress, and friends, venturing into American culture only vicariously through the soap operas she watched but did not understand on the television. Mai and Quang, who had lived in Vietnam for twenty-three years and in the United States for ten, exhibited bilingual and bicultural characteristics. These traits were evident in their ability to communicate fluently in both English and Vietnamese, in their patterns of dress, and in the mixture of American and Vietnamese friendships that they held. The children, Anne and Lynn, who were four and two years old, were unquestionably the most "American" of the three generations. Unlike their parents, their English was flawless. In addition, their dress was totally American, and their friends from their day care center were all American. Their only link to their Vietnamese heritage was through what their parents and their grandmother would have

the time and inclination to teach them. So far, there was little indication of their being isolated in any manner from American language and culture.

Limitations of the Study

Two limitations of the study involved the size of the sample and the time at which the data was collected. First, the experiences of one family would, of course, not necessarily represent those of an entire population. However, when generalizations about the Vietnamese population were drawn from the data, an attempt was made to substantiate those generalizations with either quantitative studies involving a considerably larger number of subjects or with published documentation on the Vietnamese refugee. It is hoped that whatever may have been lost quantitatively was gained qualitatively in the depth and detail of the subjects' responses.

Secondly, the ten-year lapse of time between the subjects' experiences and their descriptions of those experiences may have affected the clarity of their recollection of the original experience. On the other hand, it is the contention here that the temporal distance created a more rational, thoughtful, and mature perspective of the Vietnamese refugee experience. It was the intent of this study to examine a Vietnamese refugee family's experience in the United States after a ten-year period to obtain a longitudinal perspective on their educational and cultural

experience here.

Recommendations

Further study of the Vietnamese refugee's experience is needed to determine the long-term effect of resettlement camps, education, sponsorship, and orientation on the refugees and their descendants. More longitudinal case studies from various regions of the United States need to be done to validate the quantitative studies completed to date.

Based on the finding of this study that social class significantly affected, among other things, the refugees' decision to refuse welfare and return to school, more studies on the influence of social class and acculturation need to be accomplished. The relationship between social class, education, employment, and housing patterns of Vietnamese refugee would illuminate many other questions on immigrant and refugee resettlement patterns.

The children of Vietnamese refugees growing up in the United States and their acculturation to American life, their attitudes towards the Vietnamese war, and their success rates in the educational system will prove to be fertile ground for investigation.

Finally, the effect the Vietnamese refugees have had on Americans and their culture will need to be examined if a truly holistic picture of the Vietnamese acculturation process is to be drawn.

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APPENDIX A

CHRONOLOGY

	<u>Ly Family History</u>	<u>Political History</u>
1951	Mai Nguyen is born in Hanoi. Quang Ly is born in Saigon.	Korean War cease-fire talks begin. In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh creates Workers Party
1954	Nguyen family moves to Saigon.	French defeated at Dien Bien Phu by Communist forces. Agreements in Geneva divide Vietnam at seventeenth parallel. Thousands of refugees flee to South Vietnam. U.S. envoy arrives in Vietnam to support Diem.
1956	Mai and Quang begin elementary school.	For a year the U.S. has giving aid to the Saigon government.
1964	Mai and Quang prepare to take <u>Tu Tai I</u> examination, completing first cycle of secondary education.	United States begins bombing North Vietnam.
1967	Mai and Quang prepare to take <u>Tu Tai II</u> , completing second cycle of secondary education.	Thieu is elected president of South Vietnam.

Ly Family HistoryPolitical History

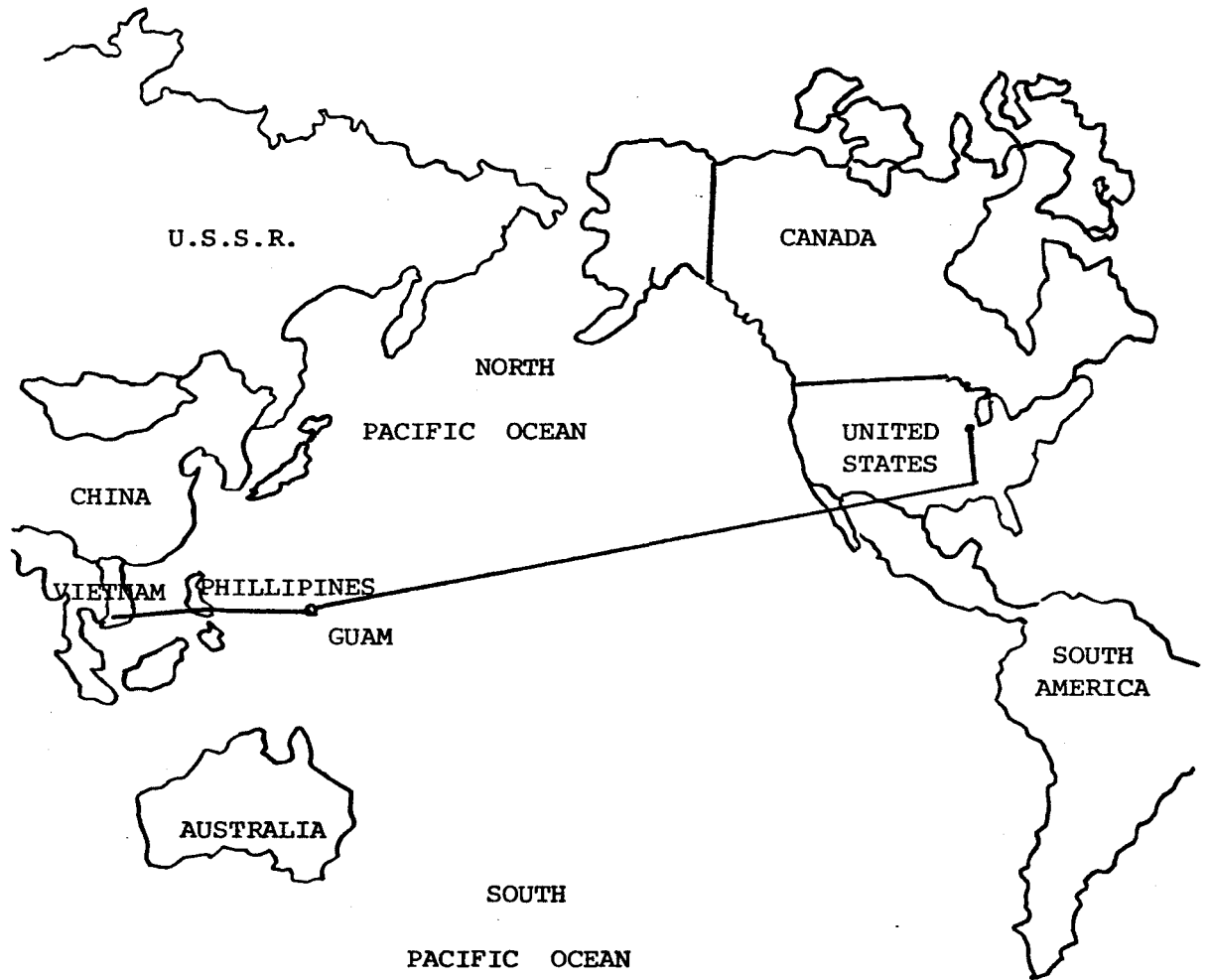
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| 1968 | Mai and Quang graduate from secondary school. | Tet offensive begins: Communist troops shock South Vietnam by attacking urban centers, including Saigon, during Tet, the lunar New Year. The war moves from a rural to an urban setting. |
| 1970 | Quang enters the law faculty at the University of Saigon. | American troops invade Cambodia. Four students are killed in war protests at Kent State University. |
| 1971 | Mai enters the law faculty at the University of Saigon. | Lieutenant William Calley is convicted of the murder of civilians at the My Lai massacre. |
| 1974 | Mai and Quang prepare for law examinations. | Communist troops increase in South Vietnam. |
| 1975 | The Ly family and the Nguyen family flee Vietnam in April. Both families arrive at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. Mai and Quang meet. The families separate to live with different sponsors. In August, Quang and Mai begin work at Northeastern Illinois University in political science and English. | Communist troops march through Saigon. |
| 1977 | Mai and Quang graduate from Northeastern, get married, move into their apartment and begin their first jobs as a case worker and tutor. | In January, Jimmy Carter is inaugurated as President of the United States. |
| 1980 | Mai gives birth to Anne. | Ronald Reagan is elected President of the United States. |

Ly Family HistoryPolitical History

- 1982 Mai gives birth to a second daughter, Lynn. Mai and Quang begin work on their computer science degrees.
- 1984 Mai and Quang receive their second bachelors' degrees from Northeastern in May. Quang begins a new job as a computer analyst with Hart, Schaffner, and Marx. Mai begins a new job as a data processing trainer for Spiegel. They are in the market for their first house.
- 1985 The Lys purchase their first house in a far western suburb. Both Quang and Mai are accepted into a master's program in computer science at De Paul University.
- Vietnam memorial is unveiled in Washington, D.C.
- Ronald Reagan is elected for a second term.
- Vietnam continues sending troops into Cambodia. The United States quietly observes a ten-year anniversary of the end of the War in Vietnam.

APPENDIX B

MAP OF REFUGEE FLIGHT



APPROVAL SHEET

The dissertation submitted by Nancy Prendergast has been read and approved by the following committee:

Dr. Joan M. Wozniak, Director
Professor of Education, Loyola

Dr. Gerald L. Gutek
Professor, Education and
Dean, School of Education, Loyola

Dr. Joan K. Smith
Associate Professor, Education and
Associate Dean, Graduate School, Loyola

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date

4/16/85

Director's Signature

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Joan M. Wozniak", written over a horizontal line.