

Finding Home

Loni Nguyen

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Bombs bursting, gunshots flying, people bleeding to death were all too familiar sights for Nancy Loan Lu. The Second Indochina war, popularly known in the United States as the Vietnam War, began in 1959, three years before she was born. She was born and raised in the small southern village of Rachgia, where she resided until 1979, just four years after the war ended. As she grew up, she witnessed the changes of her community as the communist began to take over. Slowly, her freedom began to disappear, while fear and resentment spread.

Her life in Vietnam was terrifying. “You may die in the middle of the night. You don’t know that, because the bombs [are] coming and you don’t know where [the communist Viet Cong] are going to bomb,” Lu recalled. “Everyday I experienced bombing and see people die in front of me... my mom died because of that.” When Lu was three, a bomb killed her mother. At the funeral ceremony, many people came to pay their respects. With such a large crowd, Lu thought the family was having party. She could not comprehend what death meant, until she realized that her mother was never coming back. Unfortunately, her mother’s death was just one of many. The total civilian deaths in North and South Vietnam through out the war alone are believed to be nearly 1,565,000 people. The median for all deaths throughout the war is approximately 2,850,000. This meant that more than half of the deaths that occurred were innocent civilians, like her mother.

The Vietnam War was similar to the Korean War, where the country was divided in two; North Vietnam and South Vietnam. A communist named Ho Chi Minh led the North, while the old anti- communist government led the South. Minh had declared Vietnam a free county in 1945, but imperialistic France remained involved in Vietnam until 1954. The war was sparked in 1959 due to debate about which type of government the country should unify under. The question was should Vietnam be under communism rule or a free market economy? Although the war was seen as a fight against communism for Southerners, Lu had no idea what they were. She said, “I was too young, and nobody [explained] to me what communist [are]... I thought communist [were] monsters... so when the war ended on April 30, 1975, I was terrified... and then I found out they [were] just human.”

The war ended as US troops began to be pulled out after the Tet Offensive. It was the first war that the Americans could not win. The northern army and the Viet Cong communist guerrilla fighters knew the terrain better, and used it to their advantage. Another issue was that the VC looked just like everyone else. It was difficult to distinguish who were your allies from who were the enemy. They also received support from the former Soviet Union and China.

As the North gained control, communism spread throughout the country. It was a difficult change for everyone, some more than others. “Before it was free, because my father was a business man and we had money;...but when the communists came, they came to our house and [took] inventory to see what we have... and they took everything away,” recalled Lu, “they [wanted] to send us to the communist zone.”

The communist zone was where “trouble makers” were sent. These people were

jailed because they supposedly were a threat to the communist regime. “Jail is a nightmare place, they can torture you, they can do whatever they want with you,” said Lu.

Fear was used as a mean for control. The news and media was heavily monitored. In the small villages, newspapers did not necessarily exist. News was spread by word of mouth, partly due to the regulation of what was being printed. Typically, what was printed was bias propaganda that did not express the entire truth.

Not only were the Southerners shocked to see the communists, the communists were shocked to see that Southerners. The North Vietnamese soldiers and cadres were taught that imperialism and foreign capitalism left Southerners exploited and suffering from poverty. On the contrary, food, clothing, entertainment, and other goods were ubiquitous in the South. Many of the goods they saw were scarce in the North.

Lu had noticed that change when she went to school. Even before the war, teachers were allowed to spank children if they were not behaving or failed to memorize the work. Teachers were considered parental figures, which the students were to obey. If they did not listen to the teachers, their parents spanked them as well. However, after the communist take over in the south, students were taught communistic beliefs. “We went to school and everyday we had to learn about Ho Chi Minh, how ‘great’ he is,” recalled Lu. Parents began warning children not to believe the teachings anymore, but out of fear, to go to school anyways. Southerners knew that regardless of what they were taught, they should not trust the communist government.

After hearing stories about people having better lives in America, Lu decided she wanted to leave as well. She held the same hope her father had when he first came to Vietnam from Canton, China. He was poor in Canton and heard that he could get rich if he started a business in Vietnam. At the age of fourteen he left for Vietnam alone, unsure of the difficulties he would face. Due to his struggle with understanding the language at the time, he was taken advantage of. He had taken a job at a rice field and had wanted to purchase the land in order to start his own business. The owner of the land wrote out a contract in Vietnamese, which he could not read. He signed the contract with the belief that he could trust the owner, but he was proven wrong. The contract actually stated that he still owed the man twenty thousand Vietnamese dollars, which was a large sum at the time, (Currently 16,000 Vietnamese dollars is worth one US dollar) and that he still could not own the land. He feared for his life at this point and ran away without telling anyone. “By working hard he built his own business again,” Lu said proudly about her father. Her father had become successful and had many children, but he did not anticipate the war. Just as he had left for a better life, his children felt the need to do the same.

Her older sister and one of her older brothers had left the country before her. She finally left the country in 1979. Her father had paid the government four ounces of gold for her to leave legally. Typically, the price to leave was approximately fifteen to twenty ounces, but her elder brother had “connections” Lu recalled. Even now, this is a large amount of money. When she left the country she did not know what to expect, or that she would become one of the many refugees that would become known as the Boat People.

“The boat was 18 meters long, but there [were about] 350 people. We [were] packed like sardines. We sit next to each other on the whole, you don’t see anything but peoples heads,” said Lu. She was one of the many asylum seeking boat people, who left Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the 1970’s and 1980’s due to the war. These people left

for various reasons, mainly due to the war. Southern Vietnamese supporters were arrested, tortured and killed in various ways, such as being injected with poisons, and being shackled and lashed. Other people were escaping poverty. Those that were leaving Cambodia were avoiding the Killing Field Massacre by the Khmer Rouge regime. Although Lu had left right before the Sino- Vietnamese war between Vietnam and the People's Republic of China began in 1979, this war caused many ethnic Chinese people such as her to leave Vietnam as well.

Her life on the boat proved to be difficult right from the start. When her boat began to leave shore, another boat left at the same time. As the two boats took off, they crashed and left a hole in the boat Lu was sailing on. Although they crashed, they had to keep going. "The government didn't care and my boat was broken...if we die, we die, it's none of their business... we couldn't come back, we wanted a better life. So we don't care, either we leave... or we die at sea."

For days and nights they sailed on the shore with little food or water. People became sea sick and were vomiting left and right. With a hole in the boat, they tried to get help from large merchant boats by burning random papers to get their attention. Several of these boats passed, but only one reluctantly stopped. The Thai captain appeared to take pity on the refugees, but there were so many of them. He allowed half of them to board his ship, which included Lu. The other half remained on the original boat, which remained beside the Thai ship.

The crew fed the refugees and got them to calm down. One of the crewmembers asked for a watch in order to check the time so that they could call Malaysia, the destination of Lu and the other refugees. Lu recalled one man finally handing his watch over, believing that he could trust the crew that saved them. "But as soon [as] the guy handed over the watch... he took the gun out and [started] shooting in the air." The ship they boarded turned out to be a Thai pirate ship.

Unfortunately, the tales of pirates' ships preying on helpless boat refugees are numerous. They knew that the refugees were carrying gold, jewelry, and other small valuable items in order to start their new lives. On the ship that Lu was on, they forced everyone to raise their hands as they searched them one by one. Lu, like most others, did not want to give up her jewelry. The pirates searched the refugees five or six times to make sure they were not hiding any valuables. Lu made a quick attempt to hide them by placing them under a fishnet, while tying one necklace to her toe and stepping on it.

"I didn't know that as people [began] moving, the net [kept] sliding down, so [it made] my jewelry [sink] deeper and deeper [into the net.]," recalled Lu. As people began to board their original ship, Lu sat searching for her jewelry. She did not know that everyone had left until she looked down and saw a tall shadow slowly approaching her. "I looked down and saw the shadow keep approaching me, keep getting closer and closer to me," recalled Lu. "I looked up and saw the Thailand guy about to grab me." Out of fear, she decided to leave her jewelry and run. At this point, she was the only refugee left on the boat, and the refugee boat had already begun to take off. With amazing luck, she jumped off the boat and landed in the middle of the original boat.

After the incident with the Thai pirates, the refugees no longer searched for help from outsiders. They stuck together on their broken boat until they reached the shore of a beach along Malaysia, where their boat finally broke down and split in half. It was late at night when they arrived, and were met by Malaysian citizens. With little food and water

while at seas, the refugees were left disorientated. When they landed, slowly they came to their senses as they realized the reason the Malaysian citizens were waiting along the shore. These men were looking for young women and girls to molest, rape, and force in to prostitution. Lu said, "I had no idea what was going on; I was so scared... people kept pushing me here and pushing me there." After awhile they realized what was going on, and joined in a large group. They slept along the beach with women and girls on the inside, and men surrounding on the outside to protect them. In the morning, the refugees were taken to a refugee camp.

Asylum and refugee camps were set up throughout Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and the Philippines during this period. These camps were set up and funded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Although the UNHCR provided funds, many camps were in poor condition and failed to provide aid to refugees because the money was being swindled. These camps were set up to help refugees and asylum seekers relocate to safer areas, such as the US, Canada, Australia, and European countries.

Lu spent one year in Malaysia traveling and staying at several different refugee camps. At times there was not enough food provided to eat. Since many of the camps were along the beaches, Lu scavenged for seafood such as oysters, mussels, and clams to eat. "Sometimes I could not find anything. If I did not have anything to eat, then I just go to sleep," recalled Lu. After a year of traveling from camp to camp, she finally reached the main camp Pulaobidong. Here, they finally conducted an interview with her to see if she was qualified to enter the United States.

The interview process was conducted to make sure that the refugees were actually refugees in need of help and asylum. Economic refugees attempted to leave from North Vietnam and other parts of Asia during this time because countries were taking in high amounts of refugees due to the war. Although these countries wanted to help everyone, they could only afford to help those that were truly in need.

During the interview, Lu was asked questions, such as why she wanted to immigrate to the United States. They wanted to check to make sure that the information she provided was correct, and that she was not taking on another person's identity. Many Americans had taken wives in Vietnam during the war and had children. Some rich people bought their identities in order to immigrate. After Lu stated her purpose for travel and proved her paperwork to be correct, she was approved to leave for the United States.

For the first time in her life, Lu boarded an airplane that flew across the ocean, to San Francisco. When she arrived on April 17, 1980, she was met by her older sister and older brother, who helped her to settle in to the new country. Her older sister enrolled her in to Woodrow Wilson High School (now Phillip and Sala Burton High School) in order to learn English and receive an education. Lu was excited to attend school and knew that would be a challenge. She had no idea that the location was a poor neighborhood, but she did not care so much. All that mattered was that she was able to attend school and learn. Education was something that appeared significant to her then as well as now. She expects all her children to pursue a higher education and to attend college, although she never managed to complete college herself.

Her sister also sent her to a beautician school in order to receive a cosmetology license before she was allowed to attend college. She thought that earning a license in order to cut and style hair and paint nails could earn more money. Although Lu

eventually became a certified cosmetologist, she did not pursue a career in cosmetology. The solutions and chemicals within the products irritated her sensitive skin. Instead, Lu took on whatever jobs came her way.

The first job Lu took upon arrival in the United States was at a sewing factory. It was the only job she could get at the time because she could not speak or understand English. From seven in the morning until seven at night she sewed line after line at the factory. Although the lines were difficult to sew, and the workday was twelve hours, Lu received a mere two cents for each line sewn. Typically, she sewed two hundred lines a day, earning a small sum of \$1.60 due to a twenty percent taxation. Some days Lu received no pay due to screw-ups on her sewing. She did not know that her work was being exploited, but was just glad to have a job.

As Lu began to learn the language, and receive help from programs such as the Young Women Christian Association (YWCA), she was able to find a job. The YWCA in San Francisco opened in 1878, and continues to help women and girls in need today. “Strengthened by diversity, the YWCA draws together members who strive to create opportunities for women’s growth, leadership, and power in order to attain a common vision: peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all people.”¹ Lu began tutoring math at the YWCA after school, then a job agency for new refugees found her a job at a dry cleaners as a cashier. She was paid the minimum wage of about \$ 3.75 an hour, which was still far more than what she was paid at the sewing factory.

Lu, similar to most immigrants, found work cleaning in hotels. The hotel work provided her with great opportunities. They noticed how hard she worked, and rewarded her for it. They paid for her to take college courses in order to improve her English, which would also help her serve customers more effectively. From there she continued to move up along the work ladder, until she became an executive for payroll at Macy’s. Due to long-term disability from Rheumatoid Arthritis, she was forced to quit her job and become a stay at home mother. Although the idea of returning to work sounds great to Lu, it also is near impossible. The arthritis causes severe pain throughout her joints, which makes walking at times seem difficult.

Lu’s whole life revolved around challenges and difficulties. She had to fight just to be able to marry the husband of her choice. The man she chose to marry was Michael Nguyen, a Vietnamese refugee who also escaped from South Vietnam. Although they emigrated from the same area, Lu’s family was strongly against their marriage. They wanted her to marry a Chinese man, not a Vietnamese man. Marrying a Vietnamese man seemed to be degrading, and an insult to their family and heritage. The person who was most strongly against the marriage was Lu’s older sister, Kimberly.

Kimberly was Lu’s oldest relative living in the United States. She was the head of household, and determined what the proper way of dealing with all situations was. While Kimberly lived in Vietnam, she had an arranged marriage; this made it difficult to comprehend why her sister Lu had to choose her own husband. She tried to prevent them from seeing each other at all cost. However, Lu had her mindset on marrying Michael, and held her ground.

One of Lu’s older brothers helped to convince Kimberly that Lu and Michael should be allowed to marry. According to Lu, “[he] explained to her that I should marry

¹ YWCA formal mission statement available from <http://www.ywca.org/site/pp.asp?c=fvJPK4MNKqE&b=954035>

who I like, not Chinese or Vietnamese.” The American idea of marrying for love, rather than honor had begun to sink in. After several long debates with Kimberly, she finally gave in. After five years of waiting, Lu and Nguyen finally got married.

Their wedding was a strange combination of the new American way of thinking, and the traditional Chinese and Vietnamese customs. Although they had a dinner banquet to celebrate their union like in most Asian customs, their attire were modern and American. Michael wore a tuxedo, while Lu wore an Americanized wedding dress. Although she chose to wear an American wedding dress, it was pink rather than the traditional white. In the Chinese culture, as well as other Asian cultures white is seemed as bad luck. The color white is associated with death, not purity.

As the years living in the US passed, Lu continued to assimilate in to the American culture, while still holding on to some traditional beliefs. She did not come to San Francisco with the sojourner mentality, unlike the Chinese who had arrived before her during the Gold Rush. She left Vietnam to live in the United States permanently. San Francisco became her home in 1980, and still remains that way.

Lu eventually became a naturalized citizen of the United States. Although she might not have realized it at the time, but this was a major feat that Asian Americans had fought for years before she arrived. The Naturalization Act of 1790 prevented any person who was not free and white to become naturalized. It was not repealed until 1952, over a hundred years later. Asian people were considered to be strange and posed as an economical and miscegenation threat.

When these Asians arrived in the US, like Lu several years later, they were happy to receive any job. Although the wages were far lower than those of their white competitors, it was still higher than what they would have received in their homeland. “So long as I have a job, and I don’t need to [become a] prostitute,” was satisfying enough for Lu. Since many Asians thought this way, people such as Denis Kearny hated them. He had formed the Working Man’s Party in 1877. His slogan was, “The Chinese must go!” He feared that the Chinese were stealing jobs of white men, because they were willing to work for longer hours at a lower rate of pay.

Although the Chinese already could not become citizens, many people still did not want them in the United States at all. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed. This Act only allowed students, merchants, and diplomats from China to enter the United States. It was renewed in 1892 for ten years, and then renewed again in 1902 indefinitely. The Immigration Act of 1917 created the Asiatic Barred Zone, which excluded all Asians from the US.

When Lu first came to the US, she had been brought up with the idea of marrying a white American man. Although this never happened, it was once outlawed and prohibited. The US was once xenophobic, and had passed anti- miscegenation laws to prevent inter racial marriages. “In October 1948, newspapers across the country announced the California Supreme Court’s historic *Perez v. Lippold* ruling. In a 4-3 decision, the Justices determined that the state could not legally prohibit interracial marriage, thus making California the first state in the nation to repeal its anti-miscegenation law.”² In 1967, during the court case of *Loving v. Virginia*, the US Supreme Court finally deemed the prohibition of miscegenation as unconstitutional. Prior

² Fay Botham, “Almighty God Created the Races: Theologies of Marriage and Race in the Histories of *Perez* and *Loving*, 1947-1967” available from <http://www.cgu.edu/pages/963.asp>

to this, many inter racial marriages resulted in people having to give up their citizenship.

Lu in a sense was lucky to have been born after World War II, when all the radical changes in the US took place. Had she been born before this time, she most likely would have never been able to reach the US. The US has two sides; it is both exclusionary and accepting.

Although the US attempted to keep many people of color from entering, these people still fought for the right to come. Lu had the idea that, "it's the most [free] place in the world." After changes throughout history, the US has grown to be more accepting of all people. It gives woman the right to vote, which is still prohibited in other countries. Women are seen as equals here, not as a second class like in Vietnam.

Lu has the belief that she would have suffered as a woman if she had stayed in Vietnam. There woman are expected to work, look after their children, and watch the house while men are allowed to roam freely. Vietnam is still one of the worst countries to live in as a woman today. If Lu had remained in Vietnam, her children would face poverty and lack the funds to earn an education. With her arthritis, she could have died already due to a lack of modern medicine.

Since she has left Vietnam, she had visited the country twice. Although the country has grown over time, it does not come close to the US. During her recent trip in the summer of 2007, frail children ran around with raggedy clothes and bare foot, begging for money and food. Men with leprosy followed foreigners until they were given money. The cities without beggars had sent them away to isolated villages within the jungles so that they would not bother tourist. According to the tour guide, If these beggars returned, they would have to pay a fine they could not afford, be arrested, or killed.

Lu plans to live out the rest of her life in San Francisco. She is still a stay at home mother due to the pains of her arthritis. She continues to support her three children; her son that is a sophomore at Abraham Lincoln High School, a daughter (me) who is a freshman at City College of San Francisco, and a son who is also attending CCSF as a junior. Although she enjoyed her visits to Vietnam, no money could convince her to move back. With hard work, patience, and determination, she has found a place to call home in the US.

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