LIVING IN TWO WORLDS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF A VIETNAMESE AMERICAN FAMILY

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by

Hong Thi Minh Nguyen

Abstract

The controversies and political conflicts associated with the Vietnam War led to three resettlement waves of Vietnamese refugees to the United States. Adapting to a new set of American customs and cultural traditions challenged many Vietnamese immigrants who were faithful to their own familiar traditions and were economically and linguistically challenged. In this autoethnographic study, I present the history of my family experience, beginning with my parents' urgent departure from Vietnam as *boat people*, their struggle to adapt to a foreign country, the development of their family, the cultural and generational clashes experienced by the family, the reunification with extended family members, and establishing a local cultural identity. This study is grounded in personal voice to illustrate the struggles that my Vietnamese family experienced in adapting to American society. It offers a view of Vietnamese immigrants and their second-generation children living in two worlds. The autoethnographic study revealed five social dynamics for Vietnamese American families: (a) escape from civil war, (b) reliance on social support network, (c) family generational conflict between immigrants and their children, (d) loyalty to family and culture, and (e) class conflict in native country. These findings were derived from the vignettes and analyses of a Vietnamese American family living in two worlds: Vietnam and the U.S.

Key words: autoethnography, Vietnamese, immigration, refugees, second-generation

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DEDICATION

To my father, My Van Nguyen

To my mother, Sau Thi Dang

To my sister, Phuong Thi Minh Nguyen

To my sister, Thanh Thi Nguyen

To my sister, Cuc Thi Thu Nguyen

To my sister, Thu Thi Minh Nguyen

To my sister, Dong Thi Nguyen

To my sister, Qua Thi Nguyen

To my brother, Trung Van Nguyen

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The controversial political oppression of the Vietnam War allowed for large resettlements of Vietnamese refugees in the United States. Vietnamese immigrants had to incorporate "traditional values, communal solidarities, and refugee experiences into a lifestyle adapted to American ways" (Zhou & Bankston, 1998, p. 88). They were challenged in keeping their traditional cultural values and embedding American cultural values in their daily lifestyle. In addition to the cultural struggles Vietnamese immigrants endured while living in America, they began to experience generational differences between them and their second-generation Vietnamese American children. Today, Vietnamese American families continue to evolve from generation to generation, merging their own cultural beliefs with mainstream America. Although there are some told stories of survival and hardships Vietnamese immigrants faced in their escape, resettlement, and adaptation into the U.S. mainstream society, many are still untold.

In my dissertation, I explore the untold stories and expose the dynamics that immigrants and their American-born children faced while adapting to a new life in America. Using autoethnography, I explore untold stories through learned experiences; through the practice of writing, I expose my family's experiences in relation to American society. In the rest of this chapter, I introduce the goals of writing an autoethnography that focuses on Vietnamese immigrant experiences and I present the research questions. I also present literature on autoethnography and a rationale for the study. In Chapter 2, I review the literature on the history of Vietnam and the adaptation of Vietnamese immigrants to American culture. In Chapter 3, I share and analyze my parents' experiences as Vietnamese refugees and their adaptation in America as immigrants. Chapters 4 through 7 delve deeply

into my own personal experiences as a second-generation Vietnamese American. In Chapter 8, I reflect on the main findings and discuss the implications for my study.

Goals of the Dissertation

There are two main goals I have for this dissertation. My first goal is to build my own learning about the immigration experiences of Vietnamese Americans in the United States. This involves forming a conceptual understanding of many aspects, from the history of Vietnam and the political dynamics that lead to immigration, to the exodus of the "boat people" from the shores of Vietnam, to the dependence on generous volunteers and social services for support, and the cultural clashes of adapting to life in the United States. This dissertation represents an exploration of how I fit in the United States as a female Vietnamese American who walks in two worlds, one that is tied to the traditional culture of Vietnam and one that is tied to the American culture.

The second goal of this dissertation is to help readers understand the complex experiences of Vietnamese immigrants and their children. For many United States citizens, Vietnam is associated with the high number of United States soldiers who were killed in the Vietnam War. Vietnamese Americans are also stereotyped, as other Asian groups, as being model citizens who have easily adapted to United States society without significant struggles. Through this dissertation, I explore and expose "my truth" about Vietnamese immigration to the United States, the dynamics of living in two worlds, Vietnamese cultural traditions, and the dominant United States culture. I show how Vietnamese immigrants and their American-born children have unique experiences and they are another thread in the complex American tapestry.

More specifically, the second goal of this dissertation is to help readers understand 10 main themes that overlap the social dynamics of Vietnamese American families. The history and experiences of Vietnamese American families are reflected in the following themes: (a) process of immigration, (b) resettlement, (c) poverty, (d) gender inequalities, (e) traditional values, (f) marriage, (g) family rituals, gathering, and food, (h) intergenerational conflict, (i) commitment to family, and (j) skin color. These 10 important themes will be explored throughout the literature review, vignettes, and analyses. This dissertation has five vignettes. In the first vignette called *"A Mother's Journey" – Burden of Immigration*, I explore the themes of process of immigration, resettlement, and poverty. The second vignette, *"The Miracle Baby" – Building a Family*, explores gender inequalities in Vietnamese American families. In the third vignette, *"Ngày Giỗ" – Commitment to Traditional Values*, I explore traditional values, marriage, and family rituals/gathering/food. The theme of intergenerational conflict is found in *"Pho" – Rebellion and Culture Clash*. In the last vignette, *"Going Home" – Lessons in Generosity, Cultural Differences, and Image*, I examine the themes of commitment to family and skin color. In these five vignettes, I explore the 10 different themes to give context to understanding my parents' journey to the United States, their struggles, and my experiences as a Vietnamese American.

Research Questions

In this study, I aim to build my own learning about the immigration experiences of Vietnamese Americans in the United States and help readers understand the social dynamics of Vietnamese American families and the complex transitions they and their families undergo. To achieve these two goals, my research questions for this dissertation are

- What can be learned from the unique challenges of living in two cultures: a Vietnamese immigrant culture and a contemporary Northern California culture?
- What lessons can be communicated about the immigration experiences of Vietnamese immigrants and their families?

In responding to the research questions, the first vignette highlights the immigration experiences of my parents from Vietnam to the United States. In the second vignette, I focus on family dynamics within my Vietnamese American family. In the last three vignettes, I address the generational differences and conflicting cultural values in Vietnamese American families. In the analyses of the vignettes, I compare my personal experiences with what the literature indicates about Vietnamese immigration, family dynamics, and cultural diversity. I hope my family experience contributes to the growing literature on Vietnamese American experiences and the complex dynamics of acclimating to a new culture.

Autoethnography as a Research Method

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that explores and exposes one's personal truth through storytelling and using the process of writing to explore stories related to self. According to Zamel (1982), writing is a "process of exploring one's thoughts and learning from the act of writing itself what these thoughts are" (p. 197). In other words, the act of writing provides opportunities for researchers to learn from the writing process itself. Moreover, constructing a text offers opportunities to share one's knowledge with others and expose one's own truth. In sharing one's own truth, autoethnographers "continuously return to an accountability that highlights the ways in which insidious, unnamed systems of power shape" their lives (Pathak, 2010, p. 8). By exploring and exposing their truth, autoethnographers engage in a learning process, plus they give voice to personal experiences

for the purpose of extending sociological understanding.

Autoethnography, however, is not merely the presentation of one's own story. Instead, one's stories are used to support observations that are made in the social world. According to Chang (2008), autoethnography "shares the storytelling feature with other genres of self-narrative but transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation" (p. 43). Autoethnography, as a form of qualitative research, also encompasses many anthropological interests such as self-narratives of informants, involvement of self in native ethnographies, ethnographic memoirs and reflexive ethnographies, and memoir writing. Through autoethnography individuals develop a better understanding of self and their relationship to their surroundings, which is precisely why I chose this research method to write my dissertation. I have untold stories to explore and share about the immigration experiences of a Vietnamese family to the U.S., and my personal experiences as a firstborn Vietnamese American, living between two cultures, one that is based in a traditional set of values and a modern one that is multicultural.

When I read or hear personal stories, I am deeply touched by their authentic and meaningful nature. The personal and authentic aspects of autoethnography are used to attract wider audiences, offering the reader different perspectives on culture in relation to societal norms and systems (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Many people, also, can relate their experiences to the experiences of the writer and develop a better sense of their social surroundings and their sense of self.

To understand self, it is important for me to look closely at my own narratives and explore the social framework that I describe. Chang (2008) explained, "autoethnography combines cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative details. It follows the

anthropological and social scientific inquiry approach rather than descriptive or performative storytelling" (p. 46). Autoethnographers, then, are expected to reflect upon, analyze, and interpret their experience within their wider sociocultural framework. This process of reflective writing allows individuals to connect their own personal experiences with culture and to develop a greater awareness of themselves within the context of the social world.

Understanding where I fit in the social world will allow me to better understand my whole being and my cultural experiences in America. Chang (2008) noted 3 important aspects in autoethnography related to personal exploration. The first aspect is that autoethnographers explore their past and write about experiences that are meaningful to them which also means the data are readily available. The second aspect is gaining cultural understanding through analyzing and interpreting the data, and contextualizing it in literature. Through this process, researchers come to understand themselves and others, and their interrelated dynamics. The third aspect is the doing, sharing, and reading of the autoethnography, which can help to transform both researchers and readers. Researchers are transformed from the self-exploration process and readers are transformed by their personal resonance with the autoethnography (Chang, 2008). Through my own study using autoethnography, I hope to gain a multitude of perspectives as a Vietnamese American, in addition to understanding myself in connection to the social context. I, also, hope my stories resonate with the reader so that they, too, may be transformed.

Despite the personal and social benefits of autoethnography, it remains a controversial research method due to the subjective nature of the approach as opposed to more objective, traditional research approaches. Autoethnographers, therefore, are often "criticized for either being too artful or not scientific, or too scientific and not sufficiently

artful" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 9). In addition, autoethnographers are "viewed as catering to the sociological, scientific imagination and trying to achieve legitimacy as scientists" (p. 9). As a supporter of the autoethnography approach, Chang (2008) also identified 5 potential disadvantages for autoethnographers: (a) excessive focus on self in isolation from others, (b) overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation, (c) exclusive reliance on personal memory and recall as a data source, (d) negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives, and (e) inappropriate application of the term "autoethnography" (p. 54). Even though there are many critiques and disadvantages of autoethnography, it can be as rigorous, theoretical, analytical, emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena, as other respected research methodologies; it yields meaningful data and enhances our understanding of the world in which we live.

Because autoethnography is a flexible and developing research method, researchers have taken varied approaches to it. Anderson (2006), for instance, developed a framework for an analytic approach to autoethnography. Anderson explained this approach: "analytic autoethnography refers to ethnographic work in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena" (p. 375). For Anderson, then, it is vital for the autoethnographer to maintain a focus on deepening understandings of the social world and avoid over focusing on self-exploration.

Anderson detailed five key features of analytic autoethnography. These features include "1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, 2) analytic reflexivity, 3) narrative

visibility of the researcher's self, 4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and 5) commitment to theoretical analysis" (Anderson, 2006, p. 378). Anderson explained there are two types of CMRs, opportunistic and convert. The "opportunistic" CMR is born, immersed, or acquired into the group by chance. On the other hand, a "convert" CMR is converted into a group during the course of data research based on interest. The second feature, analytic reflexivity, provides space for autoethnographers to be aware of influence between themselves and their setting, and with their informants (Anderson, 2006, p. 382). This gives autoethnographers a broad view of themselves in a social context. Anderson (2006) described narrative visibility of the researcher's self as the necessity for the autoethnographer to represent themselves in the text as "a member in the social world under study and as a researcher of that world" (Anderson, 2006, p. 384). The fourth feature of autoethnography, dialogue with informants beyond the self, is important because it generates a greater understanding of targeted topics to inform and change social knowledge. In the final feature of analytic autoethnography, commitment of an analytic agenda, Anderson (2006) stated that the main purpose is "to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena" (p. 387). For Anderson, these 5 features are essential for autoethnography and they inform, in part, how I approach my own autoethnography.

Ellis and Bochner (2006), in contrast to Anderson's (2006) analytic approach, argued that analytic autoethnography is too similar to realist ethnography. They suggested that Anderson wanted "to take autoethnography, which, as a mode of inquiry, was designed to be unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative, and bring it under the control of reason, logic, and analysis" (p. 433). Ellis and Bochner (2006), further, explained their evocative approach:

> Autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning. Autoethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, and to do something, to act. It needs the researcher to be vulnerable and intimate. (p. 433)

From their perspective, autoethnography should encompass a person's life wholeheartedly. Through sharing personal experience and analyzing how the experience affects one's life, it becomes a shared experience with those who read the text. Although Ellis and Bochner (2006) and Anderson (2006) have differing perspectives on the purpose and process of autoethnographic inquiry, my approach in this dissertation draws from both the evocative and analytic approaches. Doing so is the most appropriate research method for my dissertation as it will allow me to evocatively express myself and my stories while also maintaining a commitment to rigorous analysis and broadening knowledge of the social world.

Rationale

At the present moment, while literature about the Vietnam War continues to grow, relatively little has been written about the experiences of second-generation Vietnamese Americans in the United States. Offering an autoethnography with my own stories through my own voice, in addition to reviewing literature that has already been written, I want to make a unique contribution by exploring my own experiences in the larger social context. This autoethnography is about placing my own voice in the larger framework of adapting to American society. As my experiences are unique, they will contribute knowledge to the literature related to the experience of second-generation Vietnamese Americans and offer a better understanding of the complex dynamics that surround immigrants and their families.

Autoethnography offers a way of giving voice to personal experience. This helps to advance sociological understanding of self and to "open up conversations about how people live, rather than close down with a definitive description and analytic statements about the world as it 'truly' exists outside the contingencies of language and culture" (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 435). The exchange of discussion between individuals allows for them to better improve the world because, in essence, autoethnography "centers attention on how we should live and brings us into lived experiences in a feeling and embodied way" (p. 439). By writing autoethnographic vignettes and analyses, I am able to gain better—more embodied and feeling—understanding of self and the social world in which I live.

Through autoethnography, I uniquely honor my past as part of my present lived experience. As Denzin (2006) explained, "in bringing the past into the autobiographical present, I insert myself into the past and create the conditions for rewriting and hence re-experiencing it. History becomes a montage, moments quoted out of context" (p. 423). The rewriting and re-experiencing of my past from my current perspective will support the development of my self-awareness and my awareness of others. Chang (2008) described this process: "Through the increased awareness of self and others, they will be able to help themselves and each other correct cultural misunderstandings, develop cross-cultural sensitivity, and respond to the needs of cultural others effectively" (p. 54). By developing a better perspective of self and others, then, autoethnography provides the most suitable platform for my study, so that I may contribute my unique personal experiences to the literature related to second-generation Vietnamese Americans and to develop cross-cultural sensitivity with my readers.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The history and experiences that Vietnamese immigrants endured as refugees, through their resettlement, adaptation, and cultural conflicts between the American and Vietnamese cultures, greatly influenced the future generations of Vietnamese Americans in the United States. Vietnamese immigrants, along with other ethnic groups, immigrated to the United States in hopes of a better life, to escape poverty and war, further their education, and other various reasons. The barriers of culture, language, and education were among obstacles immigrants encountered when entering the unfamiliar landscape of the United States. Vietnamese immigrants also experienced culture clash with their second-generation Vietnamese American children. To further understand Vietnamese American families in the United States, in this literature review I first explore the brief history of the events that lead to the Vietnam War, followed by immigration to the United States, resettlement in the United States, and acculturation of Vietnamese American families.

Brief History of Vietnam

Vietnam is a country located on the southeastern coast of the Indochinese peninsula, south of China and east of Laos and Cambodia. The history of Vietnam provides a foundation for understanding the social and family dynamics of Vietnamese immigrants and their children. For many decades, different ethnic groups have made significant impact on Vietnam, influencing Vietnamese culture and customs, with the Chinese, French, Japanese, and American cultures being the most influential. These influences then added to the overall experiences of Vietnamese immigrants in America.

The historical origins of Vietnam date back to 208 B.C. when Chinese General, Trieu Da, conquered a province in North Vietnam called An Lac. He declared himself the emperor

of “Nam Viet.” The waves of foreign invasions and rebellions that followed allowed for Vietnam to gain its independence from China in 1428 when an accord was signed. Although China continuously tried to conquer Vietnam, their attempts failed, and Vietnam established a more distinct set of cultural values and practices (Do, 1999, pp. 15-16).

In 1627, Alexander De Rhodes, a missionary from France adapted the Vietnamese language to the Roman alphabet (Phan, 2005). By 1777, the French exerted military power in Vietnam and became the second major cultural influence. In addition to military force, the French secured the Treaty of 1787, which allowed them to have trading rights in Vietnam and many access points. The French were politically repressive and economically exploitative which led to continuous rebellious acts against the French by the locals. By 1861, the French military forces took control of Vietnam, and by 1887, France pushed Vietnam into a new state, Indochina, which they controlled (Do, 1999).

Indochina consisted of three countries: Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. During World War II, the Japanese occupied Indochina, and while under the ruling of Japan, Ho Chi Minh gained power and public support “as a result of their successes in using guerilla warfare to undermine the more powerful Japanese and French military” (Do, 1999, p. 20). After the war ended, France attempted to invade Vietnam again with the support of Great Britain; however, the Viet Minh, a national independence coalition led by General Vo Nguyen Giap, defeated the French in 1954. Major conflicts in power led to the Geneva Accord, splitting Vietnam into two separate regions, North Vietnam and South Vietnam (Zhou & Bankston, 2000). Ho Chi Minh governed North Vietnam as President and Ngo Dinh Diem was Prime Minister in South Vietnam. Soon, however, conflicts between the two states erupted in 1959 with one state attempting to gain control over the other which signaled the onset of the

Vietnam War.

The large number of U.S. troops involved in the war did not occur until 1967. Prior to this, however, the U.S. troops first entered Vietnam in the late 1940s, before the Geneva Accord, under President Truman's administration to aid France in maintaining control of South Vietnam. Under President Johnson's administration during 1967, the number of American soldiers sent to Vietnam escalated from 600 to 385,000. President Johnson believed the conflict between North and South Vietnam would lead to communism being spread throughout Asia. U.S. troops, therefore, were shipped to Vietnam in large numbers in an attempt to control North Vietnam.

Do (1999) described a three-step process of U.S. military intervention in Vietnam. The first was to announce the Gulf of Tonkin incident, which involved the North Vietnamese firing at an American destroyer on August 1, 1964 in international waters. Three days later, there was another attack; this time it was on the U.S.S. Maddox. Johnson was then in the position to order retaliatory military measures in response. Later, it was revealed that the Gulf of Tonkin incident was false, a ruse designed by the U.S. government to enter the war. Johnson knew the incident never occurred but appealed to the U.S. public for support in entering the war (Paterson, 2008).

The second step toward military intervention was the attack on North Vietnam in 1964 when nine military advisors were "killed and more than one hundred Americans were wounded in Pleiku, a city in Central Vietnam" (Do, 1999, p. 22). The third and last step was to send ground troops to Vietnam. During this time, there was an increase in fighting and financial support. The war escalated in 1968 when the Viet Cong intentionally violated their agreement to ceasefire during national holidays. They attacked many military installations

and captured the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. These actions of the Viet Cong, in what became known as the Tet Offensive, shocked many Americans (Zhou & Bankston, 2000). President Johnson "finally agreed to stop sending troops and to discontinue military escalation" (Do, 1999, p. 24).

During the presidency of Nixon, the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement was signed between North and South Vietnam, which ended the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. The lack of support from U.S. troops and financial aid affected the military power for the government of South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese military offensive of March 1975 led to the defeats at Pleiku, Kontum, and Ban Me Thuot. By April 21, 1975, President Trieu of South Vietnam resigned. On April 30, 1975, the North Vietnamese Communist government took control of Saigon, capital of South Vietnam (Kibria, 1993). The Vietnam War ended. As a result of the fall of Saigon, there was an outpouring of refugees, "which brought the newest Asian Pacific immigrant group to the United States" (Do, 1999, p. 26). This marked a new era for Vietnamese immigrants and their families. The immigration process to the United States and other parts of the world allowed for Vietnamese families to renew their lives after the Vietnam War. Vietnamese immigrants had no choice, but to seek refuge in a different country unless they wanted to be under Communist rule. These harsh decisions affected the future of Vietnamese immigrants and their children.

Immigration to the United States

First Wave

The Vietnam War was a turning point for many Vietnamese families. To escape the political oppression, Vietnamese families made the difficult decision to leave their homeland and embark on a journey in a new country. These immigrant families made decisions to flee

Vietnam in three waves to the United States or other parts of the world. The first wave began with the eight Vietnamese immigrants who came in 1952 during the French occupation (Gudykunst, 2001, p. 80). From that point until 1975, the first wave of immigrants was "made up primarily of refugees of South Vietnamese government officials, U.S. related personnel, and members of the Vietnamese elite" (Zhou & Bankston, 2000, pp. 7-8). Do (1999) noted, "these new immigrants were relatively well educated, spoke some English, had some marketable skills, came from urban areas, and were Westernized" (p. 26). Due to the political turmoil from the Vietnam War, these Vietnamese professionals fled their country as refugees.

Second Wave

The second wave of Vietnamese immigrants came after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Their migration marked the greatest influx of refugees into the United States of any period. These immigrants were known as the "boat people" (Zhou & Bankston, 1998, p. 24). The South Vietnamese were escaping the wrath of North Vietnam after they had lost the Vietnam War. To flee the Communist regime of North Vietnam, thousands of refugees used small boats immediately after the fall of Saigon. The term "boat people" was used to describe the "flood of refugees cast off from Vietnam in overcrowded, leaky boats" (Zhou & Bankston, 1998, p. 27). A number of these boats did not have sleeping facilities, plumbing, navigation equipment, or roofs to protect them from the natural elements. Many "boat people" were able to survive and found refuge in other countries, while a vast number died or were captured by the Communists during their escape. In order to provide shelter for the refugees, refugee camps were set up in various locations such as Hong Kong, Thailand, and Malaysia to accommodate the inflow of Vietnamese immigrants. During the second wave of

Vietnamese refugees' arrival in April 1975, "the U.S. government had to organize temporary refugee camps in order to transfer refugees into American society or to find third-country sponsors as soon as possible" (Do, 1999, p. 32). These refugees were separated from extended families back in Vietnam and they entered the United States and other countries in small groups.

During this time, the United Nations High Commission Refugees operated numerous refugee camps. There were "four ways for refugees to leave the four temporary refugee camps and enter into the U.S. society: resettlement to a third country, repatriation to Vietnam, proof of financial independence, and location of a sponsor through voluntary agencies" (Do, 1999, pp. 35-36). Since refugee camps were temporary, the goal was for refugees to enter the United States to resettle and start their lives over. In 1980, there were a total of 95,200 refugees that fled from Vietnam to many different parts of the world. The number of refugees continued to increase significantly over the next few years.

Third Wave

Beginning in 1980, the third wave of Vietnamese immigrants arrived in the U.S. through the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) while some were still "boat people." Do (1999) noted, "many Vietnamese have tried to escape the political oppression, the major social, political, and economic reforms instituted by the authoritarian communist government of North Vietnam" (p. 27). For these reasons, many Vietnamese refugees continued to flee Vietnam. At that time, there were 261,729 Vietnamese immigrants who settled in the United States. The majority of refugees flooded refugee camps in Southeast Asia. In late 1989, "a distinct group – Amerasian children and their families – entered the United States in large numbers under the U.S. Homecoming Act" (Zhou & Bankston, 2000, p. 8). By 1990, the

population of Vietnamese grew to 614,547 immigrants. In the early 1990s, "another large group of refugees reached the American shore under the U.S. Humanitarian Operation Program" (Zhou & Bankston, 2000, p. 8). To allow for Vietnamese refugees to settle in the United States during this time of political oppression, church groups, family members, and various organizations sponsored the refugees.

Although the government wanted to avoid groups of Vietnamese immigrants settling in one place, many Vietnamese immigrants found themselves forming close ethnic enclaves throughout the United States. With a start to a new life in America, the large influx of Vietnamese immigrant families grew and gave birth to new generations of Vietnamese Americans. Through their resettlement, this ethnic group made the U.S. their permanent home, where they raised their children and made a living. It is important, therefore, for their children to understand the immigration experience of their parents and the suffering their parents had to endure while living in unfamiliar territory. The settlement of Vietnamese families in the United States added diversity to the immigrant population during this period.

Resettlement in the United States

The political turmoil caused by the Vietnam War led to the displacement of many Vietnamese refugees. The experiences of escaping Vietnam and resettling in a foreign country brought fear as well as hope to many lives. Like many immigrants, Vietnamese refugees also had hopes of attaining the American Dream and building a better life for their children. To that end, the Refugee Dispersion Policy served four purposes:

> to relocate the Vietnamese refugees as quickly as possible so that they could achieve financial independence; to ease the impact of a large group of refugees on a given community to avoid an increase in competition for jobs; to make it logistically easier

> to find sponsors; and to prevent the development of an ethnic ghetto. (Do, 1999, p. 34)

This policy allowed refugees to start a new life in America as soon as the United States government decided on where these Vietnamese refugees would be dispersed. Since Vietnamese immigrants did not get dispersed to a central location, families were separated from one another.

By providing sponsors to these refugee groups, the refugees were guided to be financially independent in order to provide for their families with the support of government assistance. Enclaves were avoided to prevent ethnic ghettos. Many Vietnamese refugees "found themselves involuntarily dispersed, pushed into urban or suburban neighborhoods of a wholly unfamiliar type, often deteriorating areas where the residents were poor and the schools were inadequate" (Zhou & Bankston, 1998, p. 5). Due to pushing Vietnamese refugees to poor areas, they had difficulty adjusting quickly to their surroundings and they were not provided with the environment in which to thrive in America.

Vietnamese refugees had three major conditions that affected their adaptation experience in America. The Federal Government Refugee Dispersion Policy resettled Vietnamese refugees throughout the United States. In addition, the extended family networks that existed in Vietnam were disrupted through the dispersion of Vietnamese refugees. To minimize strain on the local economy, the Vietnamese refugees were pushed to find jobs as soon as possible so they could become financially independent. The jobs found, however, were of lower status than jobs they had in Vietnam (Do, 1999, pp. 38-42). The jobs were also low-skilled jobs and offered minimal pay. The dispersion process, too, was painful for many Vietnamese immigrants who were separated from their extended families. They

had to learn to adapt to their new environments without extended familial support structures. For these reasons, the Vietnamese community slowly adapted to the ways and systems of American life.

As Vietnamese immigrants entered into the United States, they were provided with support of sponsors. The sponsors were responsible for "providing temporary food, clothing and shelter, assistance in finding employment or job training for the head of the household, enrolling the children in school, and, finally, providing ordinary medical care" (Do, 1999, p. 35). Many sponsors included church groups, educational organizations, and family members. They were the first point of contact for Vietnamese immigrants. Zhou and Bankston (1998) explained the "sponsors tried to help the refugees regain their independence, expecting that newcomers would be on their own once they had gotten settled, learned their way around, acquired some English, and found a job" (p. 73). Many of the sponsors, however, were unaware of the complexity of Vietnamese culture and history.

Although sponsors of the Vietnamese refugees played an important support role in the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees, the Vietnamese families were greatly affected by the process. Zhou and Bankston (1998) described how "resettlement in pieces complicated the process of adaptation and exposed refugee families to many risks" (p. 85). Through this process, family members lost contact with one another and reunification became difficult. Many Vietnamese families had to adapt to each other in new family configurations. When reunited with old family members, wounds of separation were reopened. These wounds, Zhou and Bankston (1998) mentioned, were rooted in "the difficulties suffered in Vietnam and in the move from Vietnam to America have given adult Vietnamese a strong sense of their own identity, and the families have attempted to pass this ethnic identity on to their

children" (p. 39). Vietnamese immigrants, then, developed a strong sense of their own identity through the many hardships they faced resettling in America. Their emotional, social, and physical well being during this resettlement process affected the social and family dynamics in the United States. Second-generation Vietnamese American children, therefore, need to understand the sacrifices and hardships that their immigrant parents experienced in order to fully grasp their culture and have a sense of self-identity.

Acculturation of Vietnamese American Families

Through acculturation into American mainstream society, Vietnamese immigrants and their children struggled with the differences between traditional Vietnamese and American cultures, which caused conflicts between generations of Vietnamese American families. Cultural struggles and societal influences affected the relationships of these immigrant families. According to Gudykunst (2001), "children learn to be members of their culture from their parents, from their teachers in schools, from their religious institutions, from their peers, and from the mass media" (p. 6). In addition to cultural influences from family members, cultural characteristics are found to be associated with race, background, religion, or a combination of these factors. These numerous factors inform how people hold onto their own cultural values and adapt to new ones that surround them. Over time, the culture evolves and changes and is dependent upon where the group resides in America. Vietnamese Americans, like many other ethnic groups, find comfort in grouping themselves in enclaves. These enclaves give them the opportunity to maintain their culture, but also adapt to the American culture. The Vietnamese culture continues to be shaped by family, the Vietnamese community, and social surroundings.

Family Roles

To uphold family cultural values, it is important for second-generation Vietnamese Americans to understand family roles in a traditional Vietnamese family. Family roles are based on the Confucian belief that "the stability of society is based on unequal relationships between people" (Gudykunst, 2001, p. 48). The unequal relationships stem from different relationships between members within a family. According to Confucianism, there is a hierarchy within the family: "In the Confucian system, it requires women's obedience and subservience to the male members of the family (father/husband/son) and results in men's isolation from their children" (Tien & Olson, 2003, p. 140). The male gender has more authority over females, representing an unequal balance of power within the family. In Vietnamese families, fathers are the head of the family, followed by the oldest sons, and then the wives. The structure of Confucian relationships—by extension of society, inclusive of families—is hierarchical and collectivistic (Tien & Olson, 2003, p. 137). The unequal relationships between individuals are apparent in many Vietnamese families and are passed onto the next generation from parents to children. As the next generation immerses more into the contemporary culture, the hierarchy of roles has become less apparent in the American-born children (Gudykunst, 2001).

According to Confucianism, family structure exemplifies all social organizations and is the "strongest motivating force in life, stronger than religion and nationality" (Zhou & Bankston, 1998, p. 83). To ensure the functioning of the whole family system, every member must work together. In addition, it is also important to treat each individual appropriately so they are motivated to work toward the common goal. Each person's task in life consists of working hard, attaining skills and education, being patient, and persevering.

These four beliefs have influenced behaviors within Vietnamese American families. These defined roles and traditional values are filtered down to the next generation. Although these cultural values differ from the American culture, second-generation Vietnamese Americans must acknowledge the origin of these cultural values. By understanding these cultural norms, Vietnamese Americans can respect their ancestral past.

Family roles are strictly based on the age and gender of each individual, with fathers as the head of the families. As the dominant role, Vietnamese fathers make decisions for the family and delegate authority to others when needed (Gudykunst, 2001, p. 83). In this way, there is shared responsibility between all members of the family because every member works together to benefit the needs of the entire family. When decisions are made and conflict occurs between two people, a third party becomes involved. In these stressful situations, emotions manifest into greater psychological issues for family members. Due to these emotional stressors, Vietnamese American family members seek social support and guidance when necessary, as the behaviors between the conflicting individuals may influence their children or others around them.

The roles of wives, husbands, and children in Vietnam, however, differ from those established in America. In Vietnamese American families, "there are changes in gender roles, family expectations, generational perspectives, and family relationships" (Rutledge, 1992, p. 125). For instance, in Vietnam, women do not work outside of the home unless financially necessary. Women tend to be housewives, who nurture and care for the well being of their offspring. On the other hand, in America, women and children must work in order to support their families. Fathers also assist with chores at home, which they would not normally do in Vietnam. The change in family roles causes conflicts between generations within

Vietnamese American families, especially due to the process of acculturating to mainstream American culture. As Vietnamese American children become more immersed in the American culture, they may experience contradiction between American culture and Vietnamese culture, causing conflict within their own understanding of their cultural identity.

Even though immigrant parents are often more restrictive on their daughters' behaviors, immigrant sons tend to perceive greater parental involvement and monitoring than do immigrant daughters. The preferential treatment given to the sons is reflected in the cultural values of the families. The traditional role of Asian fathers, including those of East Asian cultures, has been that of taking a disciplinary role that instills achievement values in their children. As authoritative figures, fathers play a crucial role in exerting pressures onto their children to excel in school and in life and set high standards for children to follow. In turn, traditional values are apparent in their Vietnamese American children, especially as they become adults in the American society (Gudykunst, 2001).

Although Vietnamese fathers assume an authoritative role, mothers, too, are responsible for passing traditional cultural values onto their children. Koh, Shao, and Wang (2008) explained that both Vietnamese immigrant "fathers and mothers upheld more ethnic values than the mainstream values of American society, endorsing a higher self-orientation than other-orientation in the achievement domain, and espousing a higher other-orientation than self-orientation in the relationship domain" (p. 608). In other words, Vietnamese parents protect and teach ethnic values to their children and hold their children to high expectations. In the United States, however, Vietnamese parents are perceived as overprotective and controlling of their children.

One notable cultural value for the Vietnamese family is respect. Zhou and Bankston (1998) emphasized that "respect—for elders, for authority, for peers, and for the self—is a fundamental Vietnamese cultural value that has been carried from the homeland and transplanted on American soil" (p. 94). As the children grow up, they uphold their parents' value of respect and high expectations, and in turn, pass it onto their children. By passing on ethnic identity and cultural values to their second-generation children, they will have better understanding of the cultural and ethnic connections to their parents' homeland, as well as a greater understanding of their cultural identity.

Academic Achievement

Along with holding strong cultural values, Vietnamese children are pushed by their parents to succeed in the American school system. Vietnamese children "have come to excel academically not only by the standards expected of a new refugee group but also by comparison with segments of the established population" (Zhou & Bankston, 1998, p. 130). Vietnamese parents are often intensely involved in their children's educational endeavors and place a great emphasis on personal effort and independence. According to Zhou and Bankston (1998), "the source of Vietnamese academic achievement lies not primarily in the immediate family, but in the larger ethnic social context that contains the family, most importantly in the Vietnamese community" (p. 150). The high standard that parents and the Vietnamese community place on their children provides children with the discipline needed for them to be successful in the American society.

In the U.S., Vietnamese American children are faced with the "model minority" myth, which defines Asian Americans as well-educated and successful citizens in the United States (Sue & Sue, 2008). Vietnamese American children are viewed under the notion that all

Asian Americans are high academic achievers. Vietnamese parents who push their children to excel in school fall into the "model minority" stereotype. This causes Vietnamese American children to experience additional pressures to be successful in school and in life.

Cultural Differences Between Generations

Different generations of Vietnamese Americans experience culture clash within their own family. This intergenerational strain "often stems from the discrepancies in values and lifestyles that occur between immigrant parents and their children as they acculturate to life in the United States" (Tsai-Chae & Nagata, 2008, p. 205). In other words, children grow up struggling between two cultures. They are often faced with the dilemma to follow their parents' traditional culture and values, while also acculturating to the American culture. Zhou and Bankston (1998) explained, "often they feel the urge to rebel against their parents in order to fit into their adolescent world as 'Americans,' but they also experience a strong tug pulling them back to their own families and to their culture of origin" (p. 161). For second-generation Vietnamese Americans, then, the generational gaps between cultures mirror the struggle of identity they have within themselves.

The struggle, however, moves beyond personal identity, causing tension within the larger family, as Vietnamese American children cope with the traditional values of their parents. They "confront cultural differences in their families that often put them at odds with their parents and widen the generation gap" (Zhou & Bankston, 1998, p. 160). This leads them to be cut off from family issues and they may physically or emotionally withdraw (Brown, 1999, p. 97). Physical withdrawal is when individuals escape family issues by moving far away from home. Emotional withdrawal, on the other hand, occurs when children still live in the same home or area as their parents, but do not come home often and

keep away from family affairs (Brown, 1999, p. 97). Their avoidance is only a temporary solution for them to stay emotionally stable. Issues are not resolved, which can escalate to greater distance between people, whereas others are immersed in the family problem, but avoid being emotionally involved. Vietnamese American children tend to be emotionally withdrawn when they are psychologically unstable due to their family issues. Unless they learn to find resolutions to their problems, emotional withdrawal is only a momentary diversion from reality. The Vietnamese youth "find themselves straddling two different social worlds; the one from which they or their parents came and the one in which they are maturing" (Zhou & Bankston, 1998, p. 161). This parallel is difficult for many children who are struggling between two cultures. It is important, therefore, for immigrant parents to share their experiences prior, during, and after the Vietnam War with their children in order for their children to understand how their family was shaped in America and the cultural struggles they had endured.

CHAPTER THREE: "A MOTHER'S JOURNEY" – BURDEN OF IMMIGRATION

As young individuals growing up in America, my siblings and I made constant rebellious acts toward my mother because we did not understand the many obstacles and hardships she had to endure in order to bring us to America from Vietnam. We were unaware of the transitions she had made as an immigrant in America. In short, I thought of myself as Vietnamese American; I was born in Michigan and was raised in Northern California. As I explore my mother's past, I realize that the decision to go to the United States was made due to political and economic uprisings in her homeland of Vietnam. The connection between foreign policy and seeking a better future for her children can be seen to have affected her decisions in terms of migration, occupation, and lifestyle.

In the 1960s, life in Vietnam was harsh and dreadful as a result of warfare. Economic development was in slow progress. My mother was born on April 8, 1961 to a peasant family that fished for a living. Born and raised in Da Nang, Vietnam's third largest city, situated near the border of North and South Vietnam, an area of severe conflict, my mother stayed close to her family, especially her mother. When my mother was the age of 6, she was unable to attend the school in her neighborhood because her family could not provide the funds necessary for her tuition. In a growing family, my mother's education was not important because she was a female, and it was the custom to prioritize the needs of the males in the family. Her father made only enough money so that his oldest son could be educated. At a young age, my mother faced gender discrimination within her own family. As a female, she was taught to obey orders and acknowledge the presence of power. Although, my mother's family was diligent, they were unable to escape the poverty that existed within their motherland. Fortunately, by the age of 9, after begging for years, my mother was

allowed to go to school along with her brother and peers. Three years later, my mother discontinued her enrollment and began to work. My mother dreamt of furthering her education, but she knew that she was needed to sustain her family's financial situation. Often times, she had to follow my grandfather about the bay, where he routinely fished and marketed seafood for a living. At times, she took on the responsibility to care for her nieces and nephews, unaware where her future might take her.

At the age of 12, my mother experienced the tragic death of her mother. The devastating loss tremendously affected her stance on life and happiness. Her mother's death made her very sad and depressed, and she spent most days working endlessly to support the family. For a long time, my mother was engulfed with tears and outbursts of anger. Even with a devastating loss, her family continued to strive forward, and worked to support the family. Difficulties rose when Vietnam became more economically challenged. Two years after my grandmother's death, the Communist Party surprisingly claimed and renamed Saigon as Ho Chi Minh City. Death, fear, and confusion rushed through my mother's head. My mother was not politically involved in the Vietnam War, but she knew that the "Communists had won." The Vietnam War caused floods of Vietnamese to escape their beloved country in search for acceptance and new homes elsewhere.

As people suddenly made their escape from Vietnam in search of freedom and prosperity, those who were left behind fell under the new regime. Life gradually resumed in Vietnam. Nearing the age of 19, my mother met and married my father, who came from a stable family. In the early 1980s, the traditional marriage process took one year, which consists of the male asking the woman's father for permission to marry, then a period of engagement, followed by a wedding. My mother soon found herself pregnant months after

her engagement ceremony. As a result, the wedding quickly took place, following the birth of my oldest sister, a few months thereafter. In Vietnamese customs, once a female becomes married, she is expected to live in her husband's home with his family. She becomes a possession of the house and can no longer claim her father's home as her own home. My mother was under her husband's roof; therefore she must obey rules of the house and show utmost respect towards her in-laws.

A surprise sprung upon my mother after the birth of my oldest sister. When my sister was about three months old, my father's side of the family proposed a plan to escape Vietnam. My father's brother, my uncle, revealed his escape plan to my father and my uncle's wife. Although my uncle had been planning his escape for two weeks, he only gave his loved ones a day notice. If his plans were revealed any earlier, news would have easily spread and the Communists would have imprisoned or killed them. My mother was shocked by my father's news; she did not want to leave her own family behind. She had no choice, but to follow my father and his family to where they were determined to go. The plan involved using my grandfather's fishing boat in the middle of the night to go to Hong Kong, hundreds of miles away, risking being caught by the Communist Navy.

The escape was supposed to include my uncle, father, and six of their siblings as well as my mother, sister, aunt-in-law, two cousins, and my mother's brother, which would total 14 people. Somehow learning of the escape, other Vietnamese refugees pleaded or sneaked onto my grandfather's boat that night. This escape was more risky and traumatic than my uncle had anticipated. Due to the fear of being caught, a distant relative, who was in charge of taking my uncle's second daughter on-board, abandoned her. She was left behind in Vietnam at 4 months of age during the time of the escape. If they decided to go back to get

her, all 35 refugees would have been caught; therefore my uncle made the ultimate decision to sacrifice her future in America for 35 people. During their escape, they picked up 23 more refugees along the way. All 58 "boat people" on my grandfather's boat survived.

As my uncle navigated, he took a route towards Hong Kong hoping that when they arrived, there would be a possibility of settling in America. The trip from Da Nang to Hong Kong would normally take 3 days, but being lost at sea without any maps, it took my parents a treacherous 2 weeks. My mother cried many tears on this voyage to the Hong Kong shore. She had two thoughts rushing through her head: fear of death and curiosity of her future. Unfortunately, because of the long journey and the large number of passengers, and little food reserves, starvation began to sink in. Forced to land at the shores of Hai Nam, China, my mother begged for food, hoping to feed my sister what she could receive. In returning to the boat, she chewed up pieces of food in her mouth, to feed it to my sister. As she reached Macau, she was unable to provide my sister with anymore breast milk, so my sister fed off of my aunt in-law's breast milk. Phuong was considered a "strong baby," the youngest who was able to survive this horrid trip. After 14 days, they reached the Hong Kong waters. My mother's future seemed brighter now that she had reached the refugee camp. Although the coast guards forced her and the rest of the "boat people" to stay on the boat for another week for further clearance, they provided them with food and water. My mother abandoned the fishing boat after a week, and started a new life as a refugee. Following health inspections, the 58 people on my grandfather's boat were divided up and sent into separate barracks in the crowded refugee camp. My mother, father, sister, and uncle were sent to one barrack, while my other uncle, his wife, daughter, and the rest of my father's siblings were sent to another.

In the refugee camps, my mother was allowed to attend either English classes or work on the outer areas of the camps. During the 9 months of stay in the camp, she took care of my sister and did minimal work for 3 months at a small utensil factory. My father worked in various manufacturing companies in order to provide rations for his growing family and he took English classes to learn a few words or phrases to ease his stay in a foreign place. A few months before approval for migration to America, my mother was surprisingly pregnant with me, her second daughter.

Figure 1. Arrival to the United States, 1981: Sau Dang (Mother), Phuong Nguyen (Oldest Sister), and My Nguyen (Father).

After being sponsored by the Hillsdale First United Methodist Church in Michigan, my mother and the rest of our family were flown to the states. First, they arrived in San Francisco for a health inspection and were later flown to Hillsdale, Michigan where they were 1 out of 9 Vietnamese families who were sponsored. My mother was welcomed with open arms; this made her experience in America a positive one. Through help from the church, my mother was able to adapt to the American lifestyle easily. She was taught the basics of running the electronics in the house such as laundry machines to sewing machines.

In Michigan, our sponsors helped her apply for public assistance, enabling her to start her life in America. Yet, my mother's movement of body and soul from her homeland to this unfamiliar country brought about cultural clashes.

Following my mother's arrival, the members of the church who have since become her lifelong friends assisted her on getting on her feet. With the help of the church members, my father learned more English, attended automotive school, and worked in occupations such as gardening. Occupationally, the Vietnamese immigrants became concentrated in crafts, operative, and service employment in the United States. Unfortunately, those who were once professionals in Vietnam were unable to transfer their skills and educational credentials, due to language and cultural barriers because of the lack of opportunities. Many were forced into the same jobs as those who were unskilled and uneducated. In the process, people who were once considered peasants, like my mother was in Vietnam, were able to mobilize upward on the socioeconomic ladder, which they would not have been able to do in Vietnam.

After hearing about better opportunities for jobs in Chicago, my parents left Hillsdale after a short period. Chicago, however, was not what they had expected. After 3 months, my parents made a decision to relocate again because they could not withstand the cold and harsh weather. This time, they moved to Pensacola, Florida where distant relatives were living. My parents hoped for better opportunities in Pensacola, but after 4 months they were still unsatisfied. My parents returned to Hillsdale, Michigan and stayed for 3 more years.

Relocating between states was common for most Vietnamese refugees who came to the United States. Like many other ethnic groups, the Vietnamese people wanted to be closer to family and others of their own ethnicity, and have weather conditions that resembled their

homeland's. Unfortunately, the new migrations of the Southeast Asians to the United States were dispersed around the country by the government in the hope that no single region would carry the economic and social responsibility of supporting refugees. Most Vietnamese refugees ended up in communities where there were few other Vietnamese. Due to the lack of community, my mother struggled to find resources that she needed. Many of the products that she had known in her homeland were not available, and the products that were available were mysteriously unfamiliar. Because of this, my mother continuously dreamed of a place she could resettle and to call her home.

Although my father worked long hours at sea fishing, he was also unsatisfied with the cold conditions of Florida; therefore my mother urged my father to resettle our family in Salinas, California where some of his relatives had already settled. By 1986, my father worked to support a family of six, now having four daughters. My mother continued to be a housewife and care for all her daughters, in addition to the support of their siblings. Longing for a male heir, my father became frustrated and my mother prayed endlessly to Buddha to help her conceive a boy. My mother's faith was challenged again; she had a fifth daughter. This brought on gender issues in my family where my father felt as though a household of females dominated him. My mother took on the huge responsibility of a "housewife," which money cannot replace.

In my upbringing, I have witnessed my parents' harsh experiences in coping with the American way of life. My father worked in the lower labor sector of the American economy. He pursued his treacherous dream of fishing, yet he was unable to make enough money to support our growing family, so he pursued other occupations. Unable to pass the exam to

receive his hair stylist license, my father settled with a job as a mover for a furniture store, doing physical labor every day to make enough money for survival.

After exhaustingly given birth to seven daughters, my mother finally gave birth to a son on July 31, 1991. My parents had tried numerous times to have a boy. Following Vietnamese traditions, only a boy can pass down the family's last name from generation to generation. A Vietnamese father would feel inadequate without producing a son.

After the birth of my brother, my mother was able to go to work. First, she found a job at a squid processing plant. The conditions were very challenging. My mother woke up early to stand at an assembly line peeling squid skins for hours. As an undocumented employee without benefits and receiving under-the-table pay, this job enabled my mother to contribute to the family's income. After a couple of years, my mother became sickened by the smell and sight of squids, and she found jobs working at Chinese restaurants. She went from restaurant to restaurant, looking for the most suitable working conditions. With no skills in the restaurant industry, my mother worked extremely hard as a cleaner, busser, and now, a waitress. Not only does my mother work laboriously to support our family, like many Vietnamese in America, she sends money to her family in Vietnam in hopes that they will live an easier life. My mother is living a double burden, having to care for two families in two different countries.

As a refugee from Vietnam, my mother was uprooted without a choice; left homeless in the process. After many years, she was in the process of adjusting and trying to fit in American society. Adjustment would have been harsh without the help of her sponsors. She moved from one country to another and to another, moved from one state to another and another, and from one home to another and another. She described the ordeal to me as an

endless journey, filled with struggle, and always feeling unsettled. All the while in the early years in the U.S., she dreamt of moving back to Vietnam after the war, and after the economy recovered. Hence, my mother refused to get her American citizenship, only wanting to be a citizen of the country from which she escaped, anticipating her return as a "sojourner." Proudly, my mother clings to her identity as a Vietnamese while we, her children, see ourselves as Vietnamese Americans.

Not only did my mother come to the states to seek freedom from communism and war; she risked her life to provide the best opportunities and lives as possible for her children. In America, she instilled upon us great values and discipline. My mother pushed us to strive harder in school, so we could achieve a higher education and a better future than hers.

For more than 20 years, my mother faced domestic violence in both public and private settings. As my father grew older and more receptive to change in America, his violent temper dramatically decreased. In the past, his temper caused my mother to live in fear, for herself and her children, and she endured this in silence. Now, my mother feels stronger about her status in our family and within society. She has been able to speak out against my father on many issues, even though she was fearful of him. As a child growing up in this type of authoritative family, passiveness has been my mother's key to avoid conflict. We were taught to obey rules and "traditions" set by my father and reinforced by my mother. Without both my parents' guidance and discipline, we might not have been encouraged to achieve higher education and succeed in life.

As my mother struggled to keep her Vietnamese culture and language alive at home, she pressed us to learn as much of it as we could. As we grew older, my mother felt a cultural clash as she integrated her beliefs and values into her new home in America. Torn

between two cultures, Vietnamese and American, my mother tried her best to learn and adapt to American customs.

I have a deeper appreciation of my mother. My mother's migration was not a choice she had made with much thought, yet she did not hesitate to escape. She had lived the classic immigrant story of survival. Oppressed, my mother worked hard, sacrificed for her family, and never complained. It is not likely that I will suffer the hardships she endured and I will fulfill the American Dream she wants for me, a dream that she was unable to reach for herself. The larger forces of the world, which my mother could not control, forced her to work and maintain a lower class status. She instills hope in her children to break free from the barriers she experienced and move up the socioeconomic ladder. In essence, my mother did not do this voluntarily, but instead, out of pure necessity. She had the fourfold burden of being a mother, wife, worker, and immigrant. While my mother might not today believe that she has successfully adapted to American life, she has accomplished a great deal by leaving a war-torn country for a better life. It is now up to her children to take her dream a step further.

Figure 2. Resettlement in Hillsdale, Michigan, 1984: Sau Dang (Mother), Phuong Nguyen (Oldest Sister), Thanh Nguyen (Younger Sister), and Hong Nguyen (Me).

For the purpose of this vignette, I address the major themes of the process of immigration, resettlement, and poverty. The other overlapping themes are addressed in the context of other vignettes. My intention in this analysis is to represent the themes in a manageable, focused way.

Process of Immigration

Immigration has diversified the population of the United States for hundreds of years. Some immigrants arrived in search of prosperity whereas others escaped economic reform and political oppression. For the purpose of this study, I want to compare the various Asian groups that immigrated to the U.S. It would be worth exploring other immigration dynamics for immigrants from other war-torn countries such as Syria, Somalia, and Pakistan, but for the scope of this dissertation, I am limiting my scope to Asian cultures.

According to Do (1999), there were three major waves of Vietnamese refugees to the

U.S. The Vietnam War escalated in the 1960s and the number of American military advisors increased from 600 to 385,000 by 1967. The fear of communism spreading throughout Asia prompted American troops to be shipped to Vietnam in large numbers. The era of Johnson's presidency and the end of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War in 1975 became a defining moment in my mother's life. She stayed in Vietnam until 1980 and when she escaped she was no longer considered a citizen of Vietnam by their government; anyone who left Vietnam was no longer considered a citizen and was not invited back.

As a result of the fall of Saigon in 1975, there was an outpouring of refugees, which brought the newest Asian Pacific immigrant group to the U.S. Vietnamese immigrants fled "the political oppression, the major social, political, and economic reforms instituted by the authoritarian communist government of North Vietnam" (Do, 1999, p. 27). The Vietnam War forced refugees to search for better opportunities, which their country could no longer provide them. My parents' escape in 1980 from the political oppression in Vietnam and their boat journey to Hong Kong marked a beginning of a new life at the end of the second wave of Vietnamese immigrants. The third wave of Vietnamese immigrants arrived through the Orderly Departure Program (ODP). At that time, there were 261,729 Vietnamese settled in the U.S. By 1990, the population of Vietnamese grew to 614,547 immigrants (Gudykunst, 2001, p. 81). Vietnamese refugees were sponsored to different parts of the U.S. and formed ethnic enclaves. With a start of a new life in America, the large influx of Vietnamese immigrant families grew and new generations of Vietnamese Americans were born.

The immigration process of the Vietnamese patterned Korean immigrants, who left their country in three waves. Around 1885, there were about 100 Koreans, which increased to 7,300 between 1903-1905 (Gudykunst, 2001). Many worked in the sugar fields of Hawaii.

The second wave of Korean immigrants came in at the end of the Korean War up until 1965 and included soldiers, their wives, and orphans. The third wave came after the1965 Immigration Act. The immigrants mainly consisted of families relocating to the U.S. Many were highly educated and settled in major cities such as Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles (Gudykunst, 2001). Compared to Koreans, the third wave of Vietnamese immigrants was poor and not highly educated.

Unlike Vietnamese and Koreans who came to the U.S. because of war, the Chinese arrived in the U.S. for different reasons. Chinese were the first Asian group to arrive to the U.S. in large numbers. Before 1849, only 50 Chinese arrived (Gudykunst, 2001). The discovery of gold, however, brought in a greater influx of Chinese immigrants to the U.S. By 1860, there were over 30,000 Chinese in California working to find gold. These sojourners planned to make money and strike it rich, then return back to China. By 1880, there were over 100,000 immigrants and many Chinese populated the San Francisco area. Due to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the population of Chinese arriving in America declined. The discrimination by European Americans against the Chinese led to the restriction of their immigration. Later, the Immigration Act of 1965 opened doors and allowed for more Chinese to settle in the U.S.

Another Asian ethnic group, the Japanese, arrived long before Vietnamese arrived in the U.S., but had different experiences. Japanese sojourners arrived in the 1850s as laborers, initially going to Hawaii before moving to the West Coast to mainly work in agriculture. The majority of Japanese arrived in the U.S. roughly around the same time Chinese people were being excluded from immigrating. In 1908, the gentlemen's agreement limited the number of male immigrants, but allowed for female immigrants to enter the U.S. By 1920,

there were about 110,000 Japanese living in the U.S. Due to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, people of Japanese ancestry (anyone who had 1/8 Japanese blood) were sent to internment camps from 1942-1945 (Gudykunst, 2001). Japanese Americans who were in the internment camps spoke very little about their experiences. There was no immigration that took place during World War II. After the 1965 Immigration Act, a small percentage of Japanese were allowed to immigrate to the U.S.

Immigrants from Korea, China, and Japan added to the diversity of the Asian population in the U.S. Many immigrant groups found their way to the U.S. in search of a better and prosperous life. The patterns of immigration by these Asian groups showed how they all came to the U.S. under different circumstances, but ultimately had the same goals. My parents represent the large percentage of Vietnamese immigrants who came to the U.S. to escape from the civil unrest in Vietnam in hopes of a better future for our family.

Resettlement

My family's resettlement experience patterned other refugee groups that had entered the United States. Through the sponsorship programs, families of Vietnamese immigrants were sponsored and dispersed throughout the U.S. As Vietnamese refugees, they received assistance from the government and were supported by many religious groups. Arriving in 1981, my family was sponsored to Michigan by Hillsdale First United Methodist Church. The mission of the church states:

> Through free breakfasts, community dinners and generous support of city, county and community organizations, we are involved in the community *hands-on*. Hillsdale is where we live. Hillsdale is where we serve. We are committed to being a beacon of

> light in our downtown community. (Hillsdale First United Methodist Church, n.d., para. 1)

The sponsorship process is unique to the Vietnamese immigrant experience. There was a growing resistance in the U.S. concerning the war in Vietnam and many felt obligated to help the Vietnamese who wanted to leave Vietnam (Zhou & Bankston, 2000). Also, churches and other charitable organizations have a history of establishing network systems of support for families in need (Farley & Haaga, 2005, p. 419). Families entrust sponsors to help them with transition to daily life in the U.S. Without the support of sponsors, life would be more difficult and not as smooth for many Vietnamese families. The generosity and support of the church was needed in the survival of my family and many like mine.

Sponsors had the important task of helping Vietnamese refugees situate themselves to the American way of life as quickly as possible. Do (1999) explained, "The responsibilities of the sponsors included providing temporary food, clothing and shelter, assistance in finding employment or job training for the head of the household, enrolling the children in school, and, finally, providing ordinary medical care" (p. 35). Although there were cultural and language barriers that existed among the sponsors and refugees, the temporary support and guidance were foundations to resettlement in the United States. After moving to California, my parents continued their communication with their sponsor parents until they passed away at an elderly age.

Poverty

As newcomers, immigrants took on jobs that many Americans would not take. They worked endless hours for little pay to support their families. Like many immigrant groups, my parents were on government assistance programs and housing. According to Zhou and

Bankston (1998), poverty rates of Vietnamese families "had dropped significantly, but they were still more than twice the U.S. average; and the Vietnamese continued to remain highly dependent on public assistance" (p. 59). The lack of education, cultural barriers, and need for survival were reasons for dependency on the welfare system. Vietnamese immigrants were not able to fully support themselves when they arrived in the U.S. Zhou and Bankston (1998) explained, "the high rate of reliance on public assistance among the Vietnamese was due mainly to the relative short time since their arrival and to a lack of education" (p. 60). Financial support from the U.S. government helped to stabilize the family. This gave family members the opportunities to go to school or find work.

Vietnamese immigrants were not the only groups heavily reliant on government assistance when they first arrived. According to the U.S. Census Bureau data from 2007, the poverty rate was 9% for Whites, 10.6% for Asian Americans, 20.7% for Latinos, 24.7% for African Americans, and 25.3% for Native Americans (Children's Defense Fund, 2008). The three largest minority groups who were living in poverty were Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans. Although these groups have lived in the United States much longer than the arrival of Vietnamese immigrants, their poverty rate is still considerably higher than Asian Americans overall. The slow upward mobility in the U.S. for these minority groups perpetuates a cycle of poverty from one generation to the next generation.

In comparing subgroups of Asian immigrants, Vietnamese families are among one of the top subgroups to perpetrate the cycle of poverty. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2007-2011), the U.S. poverty rate for Asian population alone is 15% Koreans, 14.7% Vietnamese, 8.2% Japanese, 5.8% Filipinos, 13.4% Chinese, and 8.2% Asian Indian (Children's Defense Fund, 2008). Koreans and Vietnamese are two of the highest Asian

subgroups who are below the poverty line. Vietnamese immigrants were given access to public assistance and were heavily reliant on it. My parents were examples of first-generation Vietnamese immigrants who used public assistance as a means of survival in raising their children. It is the hope of my parents that their second-generation American-born children break the cycle of poverty.

Figure 3. Uncle Anh's and Father's first American football game, 2012.

CHAPTER FOUR: "THE MIRACLE BABY" - BUILDING THE FAMILY

All girls. Although disappointed, my parents did not give up their hopes in giving birth to a boy. Only boys can carry on the family's name and legacy. This was important to my parents and to future generations of Nguyen. The girls are not worthy enough of that luxury.

As the second oldest daughter, I helped my older sister care for the younger siblings who were close in age. My poor mother could not even recuperate her body before she was pregnant yet again. Even with the advancement in technology, my parents made a choice to keep the gender of the baby a secret until birth. Each bundle of joy came as a surprise and frustration to my parents. It was not because we were bad daughters, but because there was just no way we could please our parents' desire to have a boy.

By 1986, my parents had already moved our family from Michigan to Illinois to Florida and back to Michigan, until they finally decided to expand their horizons and move permanently to California. As my parents found comfort among other Vietnamese families in Marina, CA, my mother gave birth to another daughter. Our expanding family was not normal in the American culture, but it was very normal for families in Vietnam to have a large number of children. My paternal grandmother, for example, gave birth to 19 children; only 11 are still living today.

My parents eventually moved our family from a small apartment in Marina to another small apartment next to my uncle's family in Salinas, CA. Salinas became the city that we called home and it was also the place where we received our K-12 education. As an elementary school student, I had experienced moving schools a total of five times. Due to our growing family, we moved from apartment to apartment until my parents were able to

find a house big enough for us to rent. In 1988, my mother gave birth to another daughter. My mother was exhausted. Her dream of having a son was not in her favor.

The day my mother went to see her physician to schedule an appointment to get her "tubes tied" was also the day she received news that she was pregnant again. Devastated, she went through more months of enduring the pregnancy to find out she had given birth to yet another daughter. By this time, my parents had a total of seven daughters. My father was saddened and outraged by the fact that they could not give birth to a son. He had stopped visiting my mother as frequently at the hospital. Hence, she decided to take matters into her own hands.

Months after the birth of the seventh child, my mother decided to see her doctor to get her "tubes tied" and discovered she was pregnant once again, one last time. Not believing in abortion, and with birth control apparently not working for her, her body suffered through one last pregnancy. At home, my mother prayed quite a bit. I was never too sure what she was praying about, but I knew it had to be about the baby. On July 31, 1991, my father came back in disbelief. His emotions of joy and excitement were not seen when my younger sisters were born. He had told us that we had a new baby brother. I was very relieved for my mother and very happy for our new addition. The phone was constantly in use. My mother was visited at the hospital more times than I can recall. Finally, the "miracle baby" came home. After one month of life, my parents threw a birthday party for my brother in celebration of his birth. The gathering of closest family members and friends marked a new chapter in our lives.

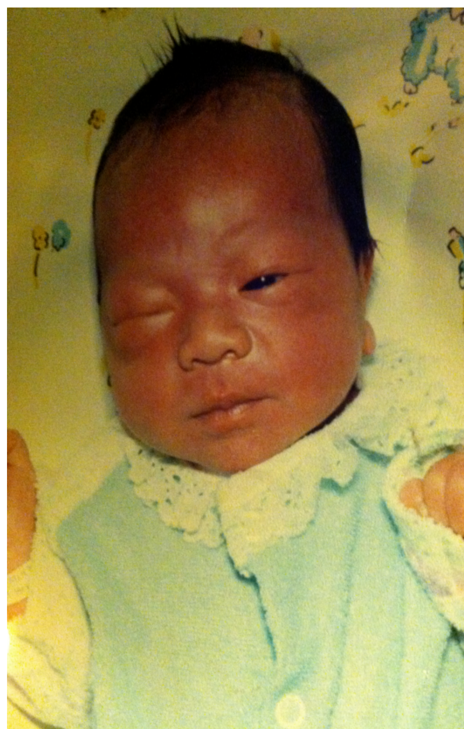

Figure 4. My baby brother in 1991.

At this time, I was only 9 years of age. I had been exhausted from the constant cries in the house, but found joy when my brother was born. As the second oldest, I found myself filling the household duties my mother could not fulfill. She was constantly breast-feeding or caring for the newborn. It was my job to watch after the younger siblings, making sure they were cared for. After school, I would come home to clean and babysit. There were moments when I felt overwhelmed by the pressures placed upon me by my parents to excel in school and being the older sister to my younger siblings. As a daughter and sister, I fulfilled my household duties without question.

During that same year, my mother made a sudden decision to shave her head. At first, I was curious to why she would do such a thing, but realized later that it was a trade with Buddha. She had promised that if she gave birth to a son, she would make a sacrifice in return. The hopes and desires of having a son were fulfilled and their prayers were finally

answered. My mother was able to carry on family traditions and cultural values through her patience and longing.

Figure 5. My brother's first birthday party, 1992.

For the purpose of this vignette, I address the major theme of gender inequalities. The other overlapping themes are addressed in the context of other vignettes. My intention in this analysis is to represent the themes in a manageable, focused way.

Gender Inequalities

According to Confucianism, family is an example of all social organization. Every individual is a member of the family and works together to create a functioning unit. Within the family system, it is also important to treat each individual appropriately so they are motivated to work toward the common goal. Each person's task in life consists of working hard, attaining skills and education, being patient, and persevering. These four beliefs have influenced behaviors within the family systems of Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam (Gudykunst, 2001). Based on the beliefs of Confucianism, family roles in Asian families are defined, in part, by gender with families privileging males to females.

The gender roles in Vietnamese American families are similar to other Asian groups whose hierarchical family structure is based on Confucius beliefs. The unequal relationships between people stem from the different relationships within a family (Gudykunst, 2001, p. 48). The five basic relationships are ruler-subject, father-son, older brother-younger brother, husband-wife, and senior friend-junior friend (Hofstede, 1991). The male roles of father and son are more dominant than the female roles of wife and daughter. Women are required to be obedient and subservient to the male members of the family (Tien & Olson, 2003, p. 140). The male gender has more authority over females, representing an unequal balance of power. My parents' preference for a son to a daughter was evident by their consistent tries for more children until they had a son.

It may be worth observing that Vietnamese American gender dynamics are very comparable to Chinese American gender dynamics. For example, according to Gudykunst (2001), Chinese American families in the United States are based on the traditional Chinese families in China. Through Confucianism values, Chinese families are strongly influenced and are generally male dominated by the fathers and their oldest sons. In most cases, extended families live in the same household; therefore, households are large in numbers. Females, on the other hand, play a subordinate role in the family. They tend to be helpers to their husbands and do not have the same authoritative power within the family. Their role is to raise children and supervise them closely. The Chinese American families are male dominated and all members of the families are expected to obey the fathers and oldest sons. Similarly, the Vietnamese culture is based on Confucianism. The husbands and their oldest sons dominate the family structure as well. The fact that males carry on the family's name and pass it onto future generations is crucial to the survival of the generation line. My

parents, for instance, were so desperate for a son that they kept having children until that was accomplished. After giving birth to a son, my mother cut off her hair as a sacrifice she had made after her long religious prayers.

The inequality of gender roles in Vietnamese families is also illustrated by the wealth gap in the American society. The wealth gap between men and women is significant, in addition to the wealth gap between people of color. According to Chang (2010), "Women of all races experience a gender wealth gap that is greater than the gender income gap, but the disparities are greatest for women of color" (p. 7). It is apparent in the American society that men are dominant in many areas of the workforce. Even within the same ethnic group, there is a wealth gap between men and women; men earn more income than women for their performances in the workplace. The male domination in the U.S. is associated with how males and females are viewed. In the Vietnamese culture, males are preferred and are seen as superior. Hence, women are not able to achieve the same wealth as the opposite gender.

As many Americans strive and believe in the American Dream, they continue to associate success with working hard. Institutional factors and policies, however, have "transferred wealth from people of color to whites, that created specific barriers to wealth accumulation by people of color" (Chang, 2010, p. 15). The Jim Crow laws, for example, kept African Americans "out of better paying jobs, quality public education, and business opportunities" (Chang, 2010, p. 15). There is a barrier between men and women, in addition to Whites and other ethnic groups. White males have been at the forefront of wage earnings in the U.S. Other ethnic groups, such as African Americans and Hispanics, faced racial discrimination and unfair treatment by the law. Therefore, there is a clear connection between institutional racism, gender inequality, and the wealth gap in the U.S.

Another reason for the wealth inequities between genders is current institutional factors such as wage disparities, lack of access to the "wealth escalator," fringe benefits, tax disadvantages, public assistance, and social insurance. Based on the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2010), the median weekly earnings of men is $819 compared to women's earnings of $657. This shows the disparity between genders with men making 20% more income than women. Looking closely at the breakdown between different ethnic groups, Asian men earned the highest median weekly earnings of $952, while their female counterparts earned $779 weekly. White men earned $845 weekly whereas White women earned $669 weekly. African American males earned $621 compared to $582 for women. Hispanics made even less than African Americans. The men's median weekly earning was $569 compared to $509 for women. In each of the four ethnic groups, men made higher income than women. Women earn 17.5% less than men (Noonan, Corcoran, & Courant, 2005, p. 860). There are visible disparities in equality between gender roles of men and women in the U.S. The dominant gender, whether it is in the U.S. or a foreign country such as Vietnam, is male. Males are favored and have greater opportunities than their female counterparts. Hence, my parents continued to have children until they successfully gave birth to a son, whom they value more than their daughters.

Figure 6. My Vietnamese American family, 1993: Trung Nguyen (Brother), Sau Dang (Mother), Phuong Nguyen (Oldest Sister), Hong Nguyen (Me), Thanh Nguyen (Sister), Cuc Nguyen (Sister), Thu Nguyen (Sister), Dong Nguyen (Sister), Qua Nguyen (Sister), My Nguyen (Father).

CHAPTER FIVE: "NGÀY GIỖ" – COMMITMENT TO TRADITIONAL VALUES

It has been a number of years since the passing of my grandfather. Each year, we have several "ngày giỗ" ceremonies to honor the anniversary of our ancestor's death. In addition to my grandfather, we also have "ngày giỗ" for great-grandparents and close relatives. Today, my father phoned me to remind me again to attend. Without even speaking to my father, I could envision the sound of his angry voice in my head, wondering where I was and when I will get to my uncle's house. "Ngày giỗ" normally starts at noon, so in my mind, I needed to be at my uncle's house by then. My father would prefer his children to be there earlier to help with the preparations, but we see it as more of an obligation to attend. I could imagine him angrily pacing back and forth and upset that I was not at my uncle's house yet. I stood frozen, staring at my phone, waiting for the voicemail to appear on the screen. Although I was afraid to listen to my voicemail to hear my father's words, I was more relieved that I did not have to speak to him directly on the phone. The typical way that he communicates when he is upset is yelling. I anticipated his yelling this morning and I was not in the mood for that. In a panic, I rushed to get ready and ran out the door so I would not be late.

During my drive, I had one mission in mind: I must be at my uncle's house before "ngày giỗ" starts at noon. Why noon? To this day, I still wonder that same question. If I arrived one minute late, I would be reprimanded. My father is very particular about his children showing up to family functions on time. Since I was the "good" and "obedient" daughter, I dared not to disappoint my parents nor bring shame to our family. As I pulled up to my uncle's house in Oakland, cars of family members filled the street. Walking up the steps to my uncle's house, incense was burning on the side porch. Upon entering the house,

there was a coffee table near the front door and the dining room table in the living room, covered with traditional Vietnamese food. The house was filled with men pacing back and forth in the living room and women were dutifully in the kitchen, preparing the food offerings to our ancestors. In the back rooms, children played video games and watched television. Just another typical day for "ngày giỗ" at the oldest uncle's house.

To show my respects, I went through the whole house greeting the elders. In the kitchen, I saw my cheerful mother. Of course, she was happy to see me. As always, I was bombarded with hugs and kisses from her. My father, on the other hand, rarely gave hugs and kisses. When I was a child, I would always greet my father from a distance, standing in fear of being scolded. During my college years, our relationship evolved and upon seeing my father, I would embrace him with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. My father was not in the house with the other uncles. He was sitting comfortably in the backyard, smoking his Dunhill cigarettes. I walked up to my father with a big smile on my face, greeted him, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. First, my father gave me a smirk, then a smile. I knew that my mission was complete.

At 12 o'clock, my oldest uncle, Anh, started his daily ritual in the living room. Uncle Anh took charge of most "ngày giỗ" gatherings since he was the oldest male in America among his siblings. The most important gatherings were held at his house, multiple times a year. At these ancestral gatherings, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism have influenced our Vietnamese culture. To perform the rites and ritual, Uncle Anh would stand in front of the dinner table, facing the ancestral altar. The altar was a sacred shrine comprised of a statue of Buddha and pictures of ancestors that have passed on into the afterlife. Uncle Anh burned incense, mumbled spiritual phrases under his breath, and offered food to the

ancestors. After he took three standing bows, he placed incense in separate rice bowls in front of the altar, in addition to different locations throughout the house.

It was a long ceremony. Just when I thought Uncle Anh was done, he continued to mumble more Vietnamese phrases. As he prayed, he bowed three more times. After Uncle Anh was finished with his bows, every relative took turns burning three incense sticks and bowing three times to honor my grandfather. The order of burning incense and bowing started with the oldest generation to the youngest generation. Uncle Anh continued his praying and took full bows, gesturing this hands together in front of him and taking his body from a standing stance to a kneeling stance in front of the altar.

Figure 7. Uncle Anh's Vietnamese ancestral altar in Oakland, CA, 2014.

After the burning of incense and bowing of family members, Uncle Anh told my other uncles to burn the paper offerings. The paper offerings of money and clothing were burned in a large tin container in front of the house, intended for my grandfather to live

prosperously in his afterlife. The elders believed in this cultural practice and would ensure that every "ngày giỗ" was prepared in the same manner. During ancestral veneration ceremony, we waited for the incense to burn completely before we could eat our lunch. In preparation to serve all of the family members on this important day, my mother and aunts had cooked large amounts of Vietnamese dishes. The air was filled with aromas from Vietnamese curry, eggrolls, fish soup, fried fish, beef and broccoli, rice, shrimp balls, duck, chow mein, bún, bánh mì, and a variety of other homemade Vietnamese dishes. Even though the traditional Vietnamese dishes were within reach, we had to wait until Uncle Anh gave his approval to eat lunch. My stomach grumbled noisily. My habit of skipping breakfast was catching up to me. Slowly, I walked into the kitchen peeking at the different variety of Vietnamese dishes within eyesight. As I walked out the back door towards the backyard, I saw newly fried eggrolls up for grabs. I looked towards my mother for approval. She nodded and waved me away to my cousin's converted garage-bedroom in the backyard. I quickly grabbed an eggroll and excitedly skipped toward my cousin's room.

Instead of helping in the kitchen, like most of the Vietnamese women in my family, I avoided the kitchen. I dislike prepping food and cooking. Growing up in a family of 10, I was the caretaker of my siblings and cared for chores around the house. Cooking was never part of my daily routines. Unless it was absolutely necessary, I did not cook. I was known as the baker, rather than the cook. I left that job to my other sisters. More than that, I resented the fact that women had to work in the kitchen while men pranced around the house in authority. I do not want to see myself conforming to the gender bias of roles set in place generations before me. I challenged the traditions and norms set in place by my parents and relatives. Even though I do not outright voice my opinions about the gender hierarchy in my

family, I use more of a passive approach to changing the structure that has been put in place by not participating in the expected roles like cooking and being servile to males.

Figure 8. Traditional Vietnamese food for "ngày giỗ," 2014.

Ancestral veneration was more than honoring of the ancestors, it also served as our family reunion. Family members near and far travel to Oakland to attend this important occasion, especially in the remembrance of my grandfather. When the ceremony was completed, I had to help remove the food from the coffee table and dinner table to prepare for our family meal. To no one's surprise, the men carried the tables used in the ceremony to the kitchen for the meal. With the living room floor empty, I helped by laying down the tablecloths onto the ground. The Vietnamese food dishes from the ceremony were spread out on the floor. In addition, the Vietnamese food dishes were prepared on plates and passed to family members to bring to the living room. The preparation for the family style dinner took place quickly. By this time, people were hungry and they knew that the faster the meals were prepared, the faster they would get to eat the food. In preparation for lunch, family members

situated themselves around the floor. Male adults consisting of my uncles and father sat on one end of the living room floor, while the other side consisted of my aunts and mother. The younger generation of the Nguyen family sat in between the older generation.

*As soon as everyone situated themselves on the floor for the meal, we waited for Uncle Anh to give us the cue to eat. As we ate, dishes of Vietnamese food were passed back and forth between family members. Everyone was talking and laughing, enjoying each other's company and the traditional Vietnamese food. "*Ngày giỗ*" is a joyous opportunity for our family to get together and bond, and to celebrate our Vietnamese identity and traditions. Here in America, we have our own Vietnam in Uncle Anh's living room, even though it is only for a moment.*

Looking around the room, our extended family now represented three generations in the U.S. since the 1980s. Our Vietnamese American family is growing and now included other ethnicities that are active in the family. One of my uncles is married to a Filipino woman and they have three daughters. One of my cousins is married to a second-generation Korean/fourth-generation Japanese man and they have two multiethnic children. Another cousin married a Caucasian man and they have two daughters. Our family's future holds many unknowns, but it is clear that our growing extended family will continue to diversify in the U.S. whereas this kind of multiethnic family would be a rare occurrence in Vietnam.

Figure 9. Family meal after "ngày giỗ" ceremony, 2014.

For the purpose of this vignette, I address the major themes of traditional values, marriage, and family rituals, gatherings, and food. The other overlapping themes are addressed in the context of other vignettes. My intention in this analysis is to represent the themes in a manageable, focused way.

Traditional Values

When immersed in a new culture, parents are challenged when they enforce their beliefs and cultural values onto their children. In addition, children's gender may play a role in values and practices in their families. Immigrant parents tend to hold greater expectations for their daughters than sons to upkeep traditional values, especially for second-generation daughters whose parents perceive may hold values that are threatening to traditional values

(Dion & Dion, 2001). In Asian American families, daughters are more obedient and obey traditional values set forth by the parents. Although this may be the case in Asian American families, my Vietnamese American family is dependent on the son to carry on family traditions and ceremonies. Based on the hierarchical roles in my family structure, daughters do not have as much authority as sons, therefore it is important for sons to learn their traditional roles. During the "ngày giỗ" ceremony, my brother is expected to observe and partake in burning of the incense prior to daughters.

In comparing first- and second-generation Chinese families in the United States with Vietnamese families, Chinese immigrants came to the U.S. and formed enclaves and support networks for one another. Both Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants rely on their nuclear families for social support and guidance. In these nuclear families, they do not have grandparents living with them. Ultimately, grandparents serve as mentors, childcare providers, and role models. According to Tam and Detzner (1995), in the Chinese American family, the parents do not want to impose on their parents. They believe their parents will not teach their children the useful tools for them to be successful citizens in the United States, which is important for Chinese Americans. Vietnamese American parents, on the other hand, teach their children an important cultural value that "respect—for elders, for authority, for peers, and for the self—is a fundamental Vietnamese cultural value that has been carried from the homeland and transplanted on American soil" (Zhou & Bankston, 1998, p. 94). Therefore, later generations of Vietnamese Americans are taught to respect their elders and care for them until old age.

Marriage

An important transition and promotion in many Vietnamese American families is

marriage. According to Hidalgo and Bankston (2010), expectations regarding family may promote in-marriage because individuals are likely to seek mates who share their expectations in matters such as family size and family roles. Vietnamese American families marry their children based on homogamy, marriage between individuals who are similar to each other. Families tend to marry their children into families who are in the same social class or higher than their own. Similarities in culture, class, ethnicity, and religion, are some characteristics parents search for in marrying their children. By marrying someone of a similar economic class, Vietnamese American families are able to uphold their reputation and wealth. This marriage practice slightly changes when families immigrate to the United States due to the clash of cultures.

Even though Vietnamese parents prefer for their children to marry within their own ethnic group, this is not easily achieved in the U.S. Due to resettling in a diverse country with a multitude of ethnicities, marriage not only takes place within one ethnic group, but it also takes place between ethnic groups. Interracial marriages have become more accepted in the U.S. and the generations of children are more diverse. According to Hidalgo and Bankston (2010), "intermarriage completes the structural assimilation of immigrants by allowing their entrance into the primary groups and institutions of the host society" (p. 282). Intermarriage between ethnic groups or across generations can mainstream immigrants more rapidly into the dominant American culture.

Family Rituals, Gathering, and Food

Family rituals, gathering, and food are strong indications of close bonds between family members. Not every ethnic group shares the same method for rituals and gatherings. Spagnola and Fiese (2007) explained, "Rituals are distinct and unique to particular families,

reflecting family identity, culture, and shared values" (p. 285). The passing of family rituals from one generation to the next takes repetition and commitment from family members. Spagnola and Fiese (2007) further clarified,

> family rituals involve communication with symbolic meaning, establishing and perpetuating the understanding of what it means to be a member of the group. The time commitment and continuity involved in the performance of rituals often transcends the "here and now" and can include repetition across generations. (p. 285)

My Vietnamese American family currently has three generations. The members of the first generation lead all family rituals. In the next 20 years, there will be a transition from one generation to the next generation taking on the responsibility of performing family rituals. It is likely that family rituals will transition into a different form over time.

These cultural family rituals bring family members together in one location. The repeated family gatherings at Uncle Anh's house, for instance, "offer the opportunity to create strong emotional bonds and an investment in maintaining connections into the future" (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007, p. 289). Family members have a sense of obligation and responsibility to be at these family gatherings. The face-to-face interactions and meetings with family members, especially ones who live afar, bring all generations closer together. Different cultures have different representations of food at family rituals and gatherings. Through food, people have a sense of connectedness with their cultural identity. Young and old generations of Vietnamese Americans experience the importance of their cultural identity and share the knowledge of the culture with each other. Through "food's presence and absence, it is well known, both serve as distinctive religious markers" (Desjardins, 2004, p. 153). For example, in my family, traditional food dishes are prepared during "ngày giỗ,"

ancestor's death anniversary. Food is offered to the dead in the afterlife for prosperity and good fortune. In essence, food can "remind us of a particular religion's ethnic roots" (Deshardins, 2004, p. 153). In addition to "ngày giỗ," during Vietnamese New Year called *Tet*, Vietnamese authentic dishes are prepared for family meals. The older generation cooks their specialty dishes with the assistance of the younger generation. These Vietnamese dishes are representations of the cultural food Vietnamese immigrant parents engrained in them to make on special family occasions.

CHAPTER SIX: "PHO" – REBELLION AND CULTURE CLASH

As an obedient child, I was not one to get myself into trouble. At least, I tried not to due to fear of consequences. I did what was asked of me and went beyond my expectations as a teenage student to excel in school and take care of my family obligations. Getting more involved in extracurricular activities and academic leadership roles at school became my excuse to avoid contact with my parents, especially my father. The cross-cultural clash of being Vietnamese American was more apparent in my household during my high school years than I had ever noticed before. I witnessed my parents' struggle to cope with disciplining their children in America and what they were accustomed to in their homeland, Vietnam, where they escaped in hopes to gain a better life. Of my siblings, my oldest sister was not the most quiet and reserved child. She often rebelled and did not follow my parents' every wish. When she did, as her sibling, I too, would be punished for her mistake or wrongdoings.

During my second year in high school, I felt a lot of anger toward my oldest sister, but not my father. Instead, I felt his pain, especially after what she had put our family through. On a school night at the dinner table, my dad had prepared each of my siblings and me a bowl of freshly homemade pho, Vietnamese rice noodles. We were quietly sitting at the dinner table eating when, out of nowhere, I saw my father get up furiously, grabbing his pho bowl. He was looking straight at my sister's face and noticed how thin she had plucked her eyebrows. With his bowl of pho in one hand, he darted in the direction of my sister, as if he was going to pour it on her out of anger. I knew he was only trying to scare her by showing his anger in this way. She got up out of her chair and ran toward our shared bedroom. I was afraid of what would happen next. I did not want to get into trouble, so I sat obediently

in my seat along with my other sisters and brother. I could remember that my mother tried really hard to stop him, at least from pouring the pho on my sister. Once he put his pho bowl down, he went on a rampage of negative words and phrases in Vietnamese. When my father cooled off, he became silent for the rest of the night.

The next morning at school recess, I was called into the counselor's office. Normally, I would go about my day going from class to class, so being called to the counselor's office made me realize something was wrong. I walked into my counselor's office and she sat me down in a chair in front of her desk. I was not in the room alone with my counselor. Her office also included a man in uniform, a police officer that began to ask me some questions. The questions pertained to the incident that happened the night before. As I answered the questions hesitantly, knowing that the reason I was there was because of my oldest sister, it made me even more disappointed and upset to the point that I heard my voice crack. I did not want anything bad to happen to my parents. I just wanted the whole situation to fade away quickly. In my mind, I knew that there was a barrier between living in the U.S. and Vietnam; however, I could not grasp what it was at that moment. Sitting there, the officer asked me one particular question, which did not sit well with me: "Did your father ever touch you?" I was annoyed and embarrassed by the question. "No," was my answer. What kind of question was that? Who did he think he is? What kind of family do they think we have? All those questions ran through my head. When I thought I was done, I was not.

Within the next hour, the police officer that interviewed me, along with another police officer and a Vietnamese social worker, escorted me to my house. I feared my parents' reaction to seeing three men walking into their house with me by their side. When they opened the door, they were shocked. Quietly, they let the men enter our home. The three

men, my dad, and myself, sat in the main living room, while my mom stood silently in the kitchen peering into the living room. I just sat still, staring at the floor. The social worker spoke to my parents in Vietnamese, their home language. This helped to break the language barriers. As they spoke, I listened. The social worker explained their reason for being there. My parents just nodded. Then, the social worker told my dad that he was in America and how he must not physically discipline his children. He explained how the disciplinary system worked in the U.S. and how my father needed to discipline us accordingly. My parents nodded again. The stay was short and my parents understood. There was disappointment in their eyes.

That night, my dad sat the oldest three daughters in the living room. As the second oldest of eight, it was hard for me to imagine what my parents must have felt. I am sure my feelings were different from my oldest sister's who had caused the chaos. Although she may have had a different perspective on what happened, at the time, she did not fully understand how I felt to see my parents' reaction to have strangers in their house, telling them what to do. As we sat quietly across from my dad, we listened to his words. As he spoke, we could hear in his voice that he was disappointed and wanted to cry. My dad told us that he loved us and did not think for a second that his daughters would do this to him. Did my dad know this was my sister's fault, not mine? I am still unsure of this. I feared that he blamed me. All I wanted to do was cry, but I held back my tears as much as I could. My eyes began to water, yet I fought to hold the tears in place and from falling streaming down my face. I resented my sister for putting my parents in such a vulnerable state. I felt ashamed for not being able to help my parents through this embarrassing experience. The struggle of being Vietnamese and American was heartfelt on that day.

Figure 10. Vietnamese pho.

For the purpose of this vignette, I address the major theme of intergenerational conflict. Intergenerational conflict is defined as the frequency, the degree, and the severity of problems or arguments experienced within parent-child relationships (Costigan & Dokis, 2006; Fuligni, 1998; Lim, Yeh, Liang, Lau, & McCabe, 2009). The immigration experience is stressful for children; therefore they often acculturate faster to the host culture than their parents. As a result, there is a difference of values. This intergenerational conflict leads to an increase in confrontations between immigrant parents and their children about appropriate behaviors and expectations (Uba, 1994).

Intergenerational Conflict

The intergenerational conflicts among Vietnamese parents and their children stemmed from differential acculturation, especially when the traditional values are challenged by the dominant cultural values. Vietnamese American families such as my own, like many other immigrant families, encounter “changes in gender roles, family expectations, generational perspectives, and family relationships” (Rutledge, 1992, p. 125). These shifting roles and relationships stress family environments as immigrant parents and their second-generation children experience a different acculturation process. Vietnamese parents are

faced with adapting to the norms of a new culture while also passing on traditional values and expectations to their children. Second-generation children, on the other hand, experience contradictions between the dominant culture in which they are immersed while also trying to hold traditional values of their parents.

In a traditional Vietnamese family, family roles are based on the age and gender of each individual (Gudykunst, 2001; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Vietnamese fathers, for instance, make decisions with family involvement and delegate authority to others when needed. Sons, from oldest to youngest, hold secondary decision-making responsibility under the father. Females are expected to be obedient to the males. Yet, there is shared responsibility between all the members of the family with every member working together to meet the needs of the family (Gudykunst, 2001). The roles of wives, husbands, and children in Vietnam differ from the contemporary roles in America. Vietnam has a patriarchal system where the husband serves as the head of the family, taking care of the money matters and providing for the family. The women, on the other hand, are in charge of family affairs in the home and raise the children (Do, 1999, p. 10). According to Tran (2007), "both husbands and wives worked outside the house in order to keep up with the rising cost of living" (p. 289). With the cost of living increasing, my family and extended family struggle to adhere to the older tradition of having women do only domestic activities. Now, women work outside of the home to contribute to family daily income. In the U.S., in contrast, many women work to support their families, so they have relatively equal economic status in the family. Many U.S. fathers also assist with chores at home, while fathers in Vietnam typically do not. The change in family dynamics for immigrating families causes conflict between generations, especially when the second-generation children resist adopting traditional roles or embrace

contemporary Western practices. My vignette, “Pho,” illustrates this intergenerational conflict. My parents expected my sister to be passive and to obey the traditional norms of keeping herself naturally beautiful, but she had, instead, plucked her eyebrows. When their worlds collided and outside agencies were involved, the culture clash became a reality. This occasion, among many others, led to my sister’s emotional withdrawal from the family.

The emotional withdrawal is often perceived as conflictive, which intensifies the conflict (Retzinger, 1991). Because Vietnamese culture is strongly influenced by Confucianism “children are not only expected to show loyalty and respect to their parents, to care for or live with their parents in old age, but they are also taught to be dependent and obedient throughout their lives” (Vu & Rook, 2012, p. 2). Vietnamese parents, especially the fathers, are supposed to have absolute authority and control over their children; it is not the norm for Vietnamese American children to show disrespect to their parents. Tension between family members escalates when the children question the hierarchical roles. On these occasions, Vietnamese fathers may feel that “they are losing their positions in their families” (Vu & Rook, 2012, p. 83) when their children do not follow family expectations. When acculturating to Western ways of life, “many Vietnamese children begin to engage in behaviors and adhere to values that diverge from those of their parents, and clashing value systems thus create or intensify conflict between two generations” (Vu & Rook, 2012, p. 2). As a result, conflict between parents and their children grow, causing emotional or physical withdrawal to occur amongst family members.

Emotional withdrawal frequently occurs in families when different generations experience culture clash. Kerr and Bowen (1988) clarified, “if one does not see himself as part of the system, his only options are to either get others to change or to withdraw. If one

sees himself as part of the system, he has a new option: to stay in contact with others and change self" (pp. 272-273). In other words, when family members feel disconnected from the family system due to differing beliefs, relationships shift with one either withdrawing from the system or changing one's self in order to adapt. Tsai-Chae and Nagata (2008) explained: "Intergenerational strain within families often stems from the discrepancies in values and lifestyles that occur between immigrant parents and their children as they acculturate to life in the United States" (p. 205). Second-generation children, then, are faced with the dilemma to follow their parents' traditional culture and values, or emotionally withdraw and acculturate to the contemporary norms that are more familiar. This intergenerational dilemma mirrors the inner struggle with identity experienced by second-generation children in many cultures (Zhou, 1997).

Emotional withdrawal is also the result of language barriers that intergenerational families experience. When parents cannot freely communicate with their children, the traditional hierarchical family roles come into conflict. Gudykunst (2001) explained, "role conflicts emerge in Vietnamese American families because children have acculturated to the mainstream U.S. culture more and speak better English than their parents" (p. 84). Speaking the English language allows Vietnamese children to be more empowered in the U.S. than their parents. Second-generation children, consequently, adjust better to societal norms and contemporary culture, whereas their parents have greater struggles with adapting due to language barriers and cultural differences. This notion of language differences was expressed in this vignette, where my father was unable to communicate his concern effectively to his children, causing cultural tensions between immigrant parents and their children.

Intergenerational conflict is heightened when two family generations do not have a shared understanding of language use (Birman & Poff, 2011; Luo & Wiseman, 2000; Trinh, Rho, Lu, & Sanders, 2009; Tsai-Chae & Nagata, 2008). Vietnamese American youth feel they are "unable to communicate with the older generation because of language difficulties and cultural differences. They feel as if their parents cannot understand them" (Do, 1999, p. 126). The communication challenge between parents and children can have adverse effects when the older generation cannot properly teach their children traditions or fully communicate their importance. Frustration levels regarding difficulties with communication in Vietnamese American families often cause children to avoid parent contact altogether or to be less present on a day-to-day basis.

The problem of Vietnamese American children withdrawing from their families is also due to the social injustice Vietnamese immigrants experienced upon arrival to the U.S. The first-generation Vietnamese immigrants were treated like other minority groups as being inferior (Aguilar-San Juan, 2009). Prior to their resettlement in the 1970s and 1980s, the Asian American Movement in the 1960s took place along with the Civil Rights Movement to end segregation so all people of color could gain equality. In addition to other minority groups, Asian Americans experienced "prejudice and discrimination; as a group, they too had been victims of institutional racism and had been excluded from mainstream society" (Wei, 1993, p. 13). Vietnamese immigrants were categorized and stereotyped as "Asian Americans." One stereotype of Asian Americans is that they are the "model minority." This stereotype represents the notion that Asian Americans have succeeded in America (Do, 1999, p. 118). The "model minority" myth placed pressures on Vietnamese immigrants and their children to acculturate to contemporary societal norms, in essence, leading to

intergenerational strains and withdrawal for members in the family.

The model minority stereotype complicates traditional Vietnamese academic expectations of children. The model minority myth defines Asian Americans as well-educated and successful citizens in the United States (Sue & Sue, 2008), placing an additional burden on the second-generation to do well in school. Those who do not do well face unfair expectations. Creating a close-knit family and pursuing higher education are valued in the Vietnamese American family. In addition to the pressure from their parents, Vietnamese American children experienced pressure from teachers, other students, and even from themselves, to conform to this image of being successful, according to Do (1999). They "feel that their parents have unfair expectations regarding their professional careers and future choices" (p. 127). Vietnamese American children are expected to be in notable careers to earn a substantial income to support their own families and parents through old age. These added expectations add stress to many second-generation Vietnamese American children. By withdrawing from family affairs, they escape the traditional values and cultural strains of their parents and can operate more independently.

CHAPTER SEVEN: GOING HOME – LESSONS IN GENEROSITY, CULTURAL DIFFERENCES, AND IMAGE

Visiting Vietnam for the First Time: A Lesson in Generosity and Cultural Differences

My parents often spoke about Vietnam, but it had been years since they visited. They reminisced about their life there with each other and occasionally told me stories about their upbringing. It was many years after their resettlement before they were able to visit Vietnam. My mother jumped at the opportunity of "going home" in 1993 and has visited five more times since then. I always wondered why my father did not to go with her. It was strange that he would allow my mother to go, but did not go himself.

In 2004, my grandparents came from Vietnam to visit us. They had no intention of living in America; just short visits of 6 months each was enough for them. During their visit, I was getting ready to graduate from University of California, Berkeley. As a graduation present to myself, I registered to get my passport and purchased plane tickets to my parents' birthplace. Luckily, my mother decided this was a great mother-daughter trip so she booked a flight to Vietnam as well. My mother and I were extremely excited for this trip.

That summer, I said "good-bye" to my grandparents, father, six sisters, little brother, and extended family. We exchanged waves and hugs at the security gates of San Francisco International Airport. Our departure was warm and filled with wonderment. This was my first trip outside of the United States, and also the first time I would be able to connect my parents' past with my own. I was curious about the family who lived on the other side of the world. I wondered why my parents kept sending money to them and not saving money for themselves. I wondered about the beautiful scenery my parents had talked about and mentioned. I wanted to know about how my parents were raised and what their experiences

in Vietnam were like. It was not until I was in college that I took interest in Vietnam. The war seemed so long ago and while I was acclimating to the American culture, my main focus was to fit into my surroundings. This trip to Vietnam represented a new way to see my parents, the traditional Vietnamese culture, and myself.

As a child, I had been resentful of my upbringing. My family was large, poor, and reliant on public assistance in order to survive. I did not understand why my parents worked in low-paying jobs, why we were struggling financially, why my father had a temper and gambling problem, and how come my mother plays the role of a victim. I was ready to put all the pieces of my parents' life and my life together. By visiting Vietnam, it would help me to understand my family's struggle in America.

The moment I stepped off the plane in Da Nang, Vietnam, I was hit with such humid and excruciating heat that it was unbearable. I had never experienced weather so drastically hot. I felt as though I was suffocating with the urge for air conditioning. I started to appreciate the weather of California from that moment. Walking through the small terminal, my mother had to bribe the Vietnamese security guards with U.S. cash to release her bags and approve us for arrival. They questioned where we were from and why we were in Vietnam. Odd questions, I thought. Why were the Vietnamese security guards being difficult to my mother? I thought it was strange that my mother was so kind to the guards and bribed them. My mother explained to me later that bribe was a routine when entering Vietnam from a different country. Of the three security guards she bribed with five dollars cash, one of the security guards at the airport checkpoint declined her bribe and said it was not right. She slid the money back to my mother. As I watched, I wondered how much money these guards have earned from "Viet Kieu," Vietnamese people living in America. From the doors

separating the inside and the outside of the terminal, relatives called my mother's name. Although I was exhausted from the long trip and humid heat, excitement of reunion filled the air.

Outside Da Nang Airport, aunts, uncles, and cousins greeted my mother and me with tremendous joy. I had no clue who they were, but I knew that they were family. Some had resemblance to my mother, and others to my father. After hugs and laughter, we departed to my grandparents' house. My mother and I rode in an old, cramped taxi to Son Tra, the fourth quadrant in Vietnam where my parents were born and raised. Surrounding me, my relatives hopped on their motorcycles and mopeds. I was dumbfounded to find as many as four relatives squeezing together closely on their motorcycles and mopeds.

Driving from the airport through the city of Da Nang, I was dazzled by the beauty and surprised by the poverty. The city streets from the airport were filled with people walking, riding their bicycles, mopeds, and motorcycles. I saw very few cars occupying the streets. There were people everywhere. Restaurants and shops were open on every major street and street corner. As the taxi drove through the city, the driver honked his horn continuously. The streets were chaotic and busy. At small outdoor restaurants, people ate food and tossed their trash on the floor. The Vietnamese language filled the air. As we approached the edge of Da Nang, I saw a large bridge called Han Bridge. It was built prior to my arrival to Vietnam. The bridge was beautiful with pillars of lights, shown at nighttime. The bridge had walkways on both sides and people used this bridge to cross over to the main quadrant of Da Nang. Three more bridges were later built. As the taxi driver drove down the main rode next to Da Nang Bay, my mother pointed out that my grandparents' old house used to be near the water between two trees. Although the house is no longer there, the tree

marked the place where the house was. This was the house my father was raised in and where he grew up. With the restructuring of the city, my grandfather was compensated for his home and land. Instead of homes near the water, the city built a huge path of bricks to turn the area into a tourist attraction. From the location of my grandparents' old home, their current home was not too far. Turning the corners, I noticed empty plots of land along with homes built side by side with their walls touching. This reminded me of homes in San Francisco. But these homes were not as nice in comparison to homes in America. The homes were made from bricks and painted. Within minutes, the taxi driver unloaded our bags in front of a gated home.

The gate was only a yard from the edge of the house that surrounded it. I looked up to see a two-story corner house. It was white on the outside and small on the inside. I looked around at the neighborhood to see many people standing and sitting outside of their homes. Next to their house was a vacant lot. I found out later that my uncle had purchased the land, but did not build his home there. They were waiting for the Vietnamese government to take over their land, and compensate them for it. The massive restructuring of homes in Da Nang was at its peak when I arrived. Land was being purchased and homes were being built in different parts of the fourth quadrant. The homes in the area shared sidewalls and were built upwards. Homes with more levels were considered wealthier than homes without them. I later learned that my family members in Vietnam are relatively wealthy. All of them own homes and land, which is rare in the impoverished country. Their lifestyle and living situation is better than my family's situation in America. While my relatives in Vietnam have property, my parents are far from owning their own piece of land. My parents live and earn money for others, not investing into their own lavish lifestyle they could have had in the U.S.

Only staying for a 3-week period, I was happy to meet and spend time with my family members I have never seen before this time. On the one hand, I was overjoyed to see my family members, yet on the other hand I felt uneasy because I only have basic conversational language skills, and I was viewed as an American foreigner. During the first day in Da Nang, there was considerable excitement and family members wanted us to visit their home first. We were now at my grandparent's home and felt pressured to prioritize our visits. One problem, however, was that we were associated with two groups of families: my mother's and my father's. How could we prioritize whom we would visit first? Eventually, we were able to work out an itinerary so we could visit all our family, using traditional Vietnamese protocols. We visited the elders first, and then our cousins. Next, we paid homage to our ancestors at cemeteries and shrines, burning incense in their memory, and we visited impoverished neighborhood families to offer financial help and rice. In some ways, we felt like celebrities, getting lots of attention, and we had the expectation that we needed to visit all related relatives. What was also expected was that we, as "rich Americans," were to share our wealth with those that we met. Relatives asked openly and repeatedly for money, a tradition that seemed rudely odd to me.

I had the sense that family members communicated closely with each other, describing what we were presently doing and what we were doing next, and how much money we gave. For the period I was there, I felt as though we were being moved around from one place to the next in formalities that were foreign. For my mother, it seemed normal to share money with family members; to me, it seemed strangely one-sided and insensitive. My mother had good intentions by sharing her wealth and she loved being treated like a

celebrity for it, yet I worried that her family was taking advantage of her. Our money could possibly soon run out.

My parents do not own a home in the U.S., and they spent their entire lifetime as hourly workers. They lived on welfare for a few years, raised a family without healthcare benefits, could not afford ordinary luxuries, and were very frugal at times. It seemed ironic that my mother was doling out money to her family in Vietnam while they, by local standards, were considered wealthy. They all owned homes and had relatively comfortable lives there, yet they expected my mother to fortify their wealth. They did not understand that my parents are indeed poor, that travelling to Vietnam was tremendously expensive, and that my parents were not in a position to share money.

My father was in contact with his family in Vietnam for many years before he went back to visit, but chose to not visit because he could not "save face" in the way he would have wanted. Family members solicited money from him and he generously mailed them some for years, and this practice gave him social stature in the family there. As a young man in Vietnam, he was popular and successful in his village, and was somewhat wealthy. Now, however, in the U.S., he struggled financially. In many ways, he was a powerful man in Vietnam, yet became diminished as an impoverished worker in the U.S. He could not face his family with pride, and he could not share his wealth in the way his family continuously demanded. He still feels shame for not being able to provide what his Vietnamese family wants and expects, and this may explain why he rarely goes there. Moreover, he does not have spending money for flight tickets to go there. Worse, he probably feels shame for asking his children for money to support his Vietnamese family and pay for travel expenses.

On his last trip there, his children gave him thousands of dollars to travel there. Soon after arriving, all of it was gone, generously given to his family.

Projecting the image of having money was important to my father, yet he silently suffers the shame of having to beg for it from his children. I suppose I have feelings of resentment about this as well, but I know how much it means to him to share wealth. I am grateful that he provided the necessary resources for me to become college educated and be in a position to share wealth. This is my life between two worlds, sensing the unashamed perspective of my Vietnamese family begging for money, my father's sense of pride around money, and my own need to be following a predictable budget.

On reflecting on these dynamics about money, I am reminded of my American values where "my money is my money" and this view of money is incompatible with how Vietnamese view money. Family units are strong in Vietnam and there is a sense of sharing that is not common in the U.S. My grandparents felt comfortable asking for money from their children in the same way my parents feel comfortable asking for money from me. My grandparents in Vietnam are wealthy and serve as senior patrons for other family members who need it. The grandparents pay for the schooling of all the young ones in their extended family, oversee a fair distribution of prosperity, and so forth, but that is not a custom that is promoted in the U.S. Generous sharing among extended family members is common in Vietnam, but it seems to be a foreign concept in the U.S. Reflecting further though, I am reminded that in the U.S., there is considerable generosity. When my family arrived to the U.S. from Vietnam, strangers were our benefactors, helping us transition to a new world, helping us monetarily. In the U.S., generosity has another frame.

Visiting Vietnam for the First Time: A Lesson on Image

As a Vietnamese American visiting Vietnam, I was aware that I was different. I spoke fluent English and even my "look" was different from the Vietnamese norm. My female cousins and aunts were petite, short, and light in complexion. At 5'4", I was taller than most of them. In addition, I had more body mass on me and was considered "bigger-boned" than they were. In California, my peers considered me relatively small, but in Vietnam, I was seen as big. After a season of playing tennis outdoors for a college team, I was tanned and much darker than my normal complexion. Like most Californians, this was normal and I liked my skin golden brown, however, my relatives thought my skin complexion was too dark and they teased me about it. Looking more closely at Vietnamese women, they covered themselves fully during the day and exposed their skin at night. A large number of Vietnamese women have light complexion and fair skin, unless they were working on farms or living in poverty. In some cases, women had extremely white skin complexion. Even though I explained why I was darker than they were, they did not seem to understand why I would choose to expose my skin to the sun. They were even more concerned when I dressed in typical Western style attire while being in Vietnam. I was an oddity. In comparing the U.S. to Vietnam, I noticed people's perception of image and how my perception of image was much different than theirs.

On a hot, sunny morning, I decided I was going for a walk from my grandparent's house to the local supermarket. The distance was not too far from the house. Within minutes, two older women, endearingly called "grandmas" in local customs, approached me. They recognized that I was American, probably felt a common affinity with me as a Vietnamese and wanted to teach me a lesson, so they smacked my arm and pointed to my skin color with a complaining gesture. They also gesticulated that I should cover up my skin more to protect

it from the sun. I stared at them in disbelief. Were they serious? In California, I would normally dress this way on hot occasions, so did not differentiate my dress code in Vietnam. Shocked by the sting in my arm and initial confrontation, I listened carefully to what these Vietnamese "grandmas" had to tell me. One grandma said my skin was too dark and I needed to wear more clothing. I thought this was strange because in the U.S. I was told I had the perfect tan in America. I nodded my head in polite agreement as I walked away. Out of respect, I did not talk back to the elders, a tradition I learned in my Vietnamese American family. My parents would not approve if I talked back to these two old "grandmas." From this event, I knew I did not fit in this village and I am sure they noticed as well. In the U.S., it would be very rare for a stranger to slap you on the arm and criticize you for the quality of your skin color. Here in Vietnam, the elders have a sense of obligation in disciplining and supporting the young. For them, all young people deserve their help in following traditions. I was taught important lessons during that visit: (a) beauty and social class are associated with lighter skin color; (b) "grandmas" in Vietnam are more forthcoming with advice than most of my peers in the U.S.; and (c) reprimands can be violent but still loving.

Days later after the encounter by the old "grandmas," I went on a fishing trip with my uncle and his two sons. They were surprised that I wanted to join them and participate in fishing because in Vietnam, fishing is a work activity that is associated with men, and it is not a leisure activity like it is in the West. Although they were happy that I was spending time with them, they were not so sure if I should join them on a "male" activity. On the fishing boat, I was taught how to use the fishing pole in Da Nang Bay. At the time, I was dressed in a tank top and shorts, enjoying the sun. It was too hot to cover myself in the hot weather.

We were out fishing for a number of hours, but only caught a few fish for dinner. In the far distance, I noticed someone riding a bicycle towards us, covered from head to toes in clothing. From the figure and dress, I could tell it was a female and soon discovered it was my cousin who wanted us to hurry for dinner. When I asked why she dressed that way, her brother responded with the assertion of "beauty." To stay beautiful, she wore shoes, long pants, long-sleeve shirt, gloves, facemask, and a hat. Every part of her body was fully covered except her eyes. In Vietnam, it was pertinent for women, not men, to preserve their skin complexion as part of the Vietnamese culture and sense of beauty for the genders.

The perception of image in Vietnam was surprising to me. I had no idea how important skin complexion was in Vietnam, and how different it is from the U.S. I was unaware that my skin tone and body structure did not fit the norms of Vietnamese women, and locals were shocked by my exposure to the sun. Although I was different and considered myself Vietnamese American, for them, I was a strange Vietnamese girl. Wherever I went, I stood out and was the center of attention for my height and dark skin. Whether I was at my grandparents' home or at the market, I could not escape the fact that I was taller and darker than typical Vietnamese women. While I see myself as being from Vietnamese culture, visiting Vietnam reminded me that I am really American.

Figure 11. My first visit to Vietnam in 2004.

For the purpose of this vignette, I address the major themes of commitment to family and skin color. The theme of commitment to family also resonates in Chapter 5 because both vignettes reveal family relations. My intention in this analysis is to represent the themes in a manageable, focused way.

Commitment to Family

The fall of Saigon in 1975 was a turning point for Vietnam's economy and government. After the fall of Saigon, the restructuring to combine North and South Vietnam together under one government took place. Thousands of Vietnamese refugees fled Vietnam to escape the Communist regime. The significant drop in population greatly affected the economic progression since many had fled the country. According to Rumbaut (1995), over 300,000 Vietnamese left Vietnam to immigrate to the United States. During this time, relationships between Vietnam and the U.S. grew even cooler when Vietnam became allies with the Soviet Union. Vietnam started to experience economic problems (Tran-Trong,

1997). Since that time, the Government of Vietnam has done little to "maintain high barriers and strict regulation over the economy and has done little to encourage economic growth" (Pham, 2010, p. 4). Over time, the government of Vietnam loosened the regulations. In addition, the U.S. finally lifted its trade embargo against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1994 (Tran-Trong, 1997). This allowed opportunities for investments from U.S. businesses and U.S. citizens. Furthermore, *Viet Kieu* started to send remittances, the act of sending money, back to Vietnam. The term, *Viet Kieu*, is used to describe overseas Vietnamese.

When Vietnamese immigrants first arrived to the U.S., their income was limited because of their reduced earning power. Some families relied on minimum wage earnings, and because they had limited English-language skills, they also had limited employment opportunities. Later, when Vietnamese American families became more settled and acclimated, their earning power increased and more financial resources were obtained. Immigrants' children, who became proficient in English and acculturated to U.S. customs, developed greater earning power, with some supporting families back in Vietnam. With more financial stability, *Viet Kieu* who settled overseas were able to make "their contributions by sending financial remittances to family or relatives" (Pham, 2010, p. 16). The financial remittances added to the economic boom and stability for family members in Vietnam.

Viet Kieu have made a significant impact on Vietnam's economic development by sending money "home" to support their extended families (Hu-Dehart, 1999). Overseas Vietnamese, like my parents, have an underlying obligation to care for and tend to the needs of family members who were left behind. The harsh experience of leaving Vietnam because of economic turmoil, coupled with the longing for reunification with lost family members,

resulted in the *Viet Kieu* developing guilty feelings and a sense of responsibility for family members. My parents are prime examples of Vietnamese immigrants who sensed a financial obligation toward their family in Vietnam. They became committed to supporting their families in Vietnam, even though they were risking their own financial stability in the U.S.

Similar to my parents, immigrants have been returning to their homeland to visit family members they had left behind. Pham (2010) explained, "increasingly due to the relaxation of government policies and reforms, the Viet Kieu are not only sending money, but are bringing remittances when returning to Vietnam, which makes the official contributions seem less transparent" (p. 16). Upon returning to Vietnam, *Viet Kieu* typically do not report how much monetary support they brought "home" with them, keeping the matter discreet. The official contributions become skewed while more money is circulating in Vietnam's economy. According to VietinBank Annual Report (2010), the "remittance volume handled by VietinBank achieves 1.2 billion US dollars, a 30% increase compared to 2009" (p. 18). The increasing pattern of U.S. dollars in Vietnam has tremendously assisted the growth of Vietnam's economy.

Similar to Vietnamese immigrants who send money back to their home country, Latino immigrants also have comparable family obligations. Based on the findings from Torres, Pelham, and Crabtree (2009), of the U.S. Latinos surveyed and immigrated to the U.S. over 20 years ago, 31% continued sending remittances to their families. Religion is an important reason for family commitments: "U.S.-born Latinos who say religion plays an important role in their daily lives are more than three times as likely to send remittances (26%) as are U.S.-born Latinos who say religion does not play such a role (7%)" (Torres et al., 2009, p. 2). Whether it is religion or the obligation for sending remittances, people who

send them build a strong living foundation for their family members back in their native country.

Although there are no precise data on how much money is sent to Vietnam from families in the U.S., the pattern likely parallels what Domingo (2009) found about overseas Filipinos sending money back to the Philippines. In this case, many Filipinos came to the U.S. to find jobs to support their family members by providing food, education, and savings (Asian Development Bank, 2005, p. 24). In 2008, remittance to the Philippines was 16 billion U.S. dollars (Ratha, Mohapatra, & World Bank, 2009). To support family members in the Philippines, Filipino family members sought employment opportunities as professionals, service workers, production workers, and other administrative duties in the U.S. (Domingo, 2009, pp. 4-5). These remittances were an important source of income for low-income to middle-class families in this developing country. Like Vietnamese refugees, overseas Filipinos have a strong obligation to support their family members in the Philippines which has led to the increase in monetary funds in the Philippines' economy. Instead of saving money and investing it for themselves, immigrants and overseas workers have a monetary commitment to their family members aboard.

Skin Color

Skin color, even skin tone, has a variety of implications in the U.S. and other parts of the world. In Vietnam, it was clear from my experience that having fair skin, rather than darker skin, was preferred by the elders. According to Hunter (2007), "the maintenance of white supremacy (aesthetic, ideological, and material) is predicated on the notion that dark skin represents savagery, irrationality, ugliness, and inferiority. White skin, and, thus, whiteness itself, is defined by the opposite: civility, rationality, beauty, and superiority" (p.

238). In other words, the notion that individuals with white skin are considered superior to those with dark skin illustrates how lighter-skinned people of color are more privileged and are associated with the leisure class (Jones, 2004; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). Social inequity based on skin color and skin tone is prevalent today.

Light-skinned individuals are often preferred over dark-skinned individuals. Based on their skin color, people are discriminated against and have gained hierarchical privileges. Colorism, according to Hunter (2005), is the process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts. Although colorism is often overlooked by racial discrimination, it affects the people's perception and preferences of skin color.

The preference for light skin is instilled in many Asian countries and culture. A dark skin tone is therefore associated with poverty and "backwardness" for many Asian immigrants and Asian Americans (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). Only poor or working people would be dark because they had to work outside as manual laborers. My experiences in Vietnam showed how older Vietnamese women preferred lighter skin. Even though I came from the U.S. where my darker skin tone was accepted, it was looked down upon in Vietnam. The relationship between skin color and beauty is very important for women because beauty is a form of social capital (Hunter, 2002). Vietnamese women were extremely pale and light skinned, in comparison to their male counterparts. Through my encounters, Vietnamese women cherish their pale and light skin, and would cover themselves completely during the day from getting dark.

Skin color has been a historical problem associated with hierarchy and race. Hierarchies of skin color that systematically privilege lightness persist in their effects on

women of color (Hunter, 2002). Coard, Breland, and Raskin (2001) noted: "Even with the abolition of slavery, a skin-tone stratification persisted wherein lighter skinned African Americans operated in a generally higher socioeconomic stratum than did their darker skinned counterparts" (p. 2257). The lighter skinned African Americans are given greater opportunities to achieve at higher levels because their skin is closer to "white," the privileged skin color. In addition, light-skinned African American women had a clear advantage in the marriage market and were more likely to marry high-status men than were darker skinned women (Hunter, 2002, p. 189). Lighter colored women have higher chances of climbing up the economic ladder and maintaining a higher social class. The social inequality based on outer physical appearances is a continuous social problem among African Americans, in addition to Vietnamese American women and many other ethnic groups.

In addition to African Americans, the perceptions and preference of skin color also occur in Mexican American cultures. According to Hunter (2002), "skin color stratification, differentiation by lightness or darkness of skin tone, continues to be a sociological issue in the African American and the Mexican American communities" (p. 175). The darker skinned African Americans and Mexican Americans, in contrast, are perceived to have a lower family status than those with lighter skin. In the areas of education, personal income, and spousal status, skin color modifies outcomes and produces advantages for the light skinned (Hunter, 2002, p. 190). The hierarchy and privileges obtained by lighter skinned individuals have been historically accepted. Skin color continues to shape people's perception, creating a divide in skin color hierarchical status. The preference for lighter skin in Vietnam was clearly visible during my visit. A vast number of the women had light skin tone and rarely expose themselves to the sun. I received quite a bit of criticism on my darker

skinned tone in Vietnam, even though my skin color has received praise in the U.S. In Vietnam, women view lighter skin as the preferred skin tone. Individuals who are stereotyped based on skin color are at a disadvantage in the U.S. and around the world.

CHAPTER EIGHT: IMPLICATIONS AND REFLECTION

For many years, I struggled with writing scholarly work on topics that did not interest me. Being bilingual offered me an advantage linguistically, but most of the topic areas my earlier professors assigned did not spark my interest because they were abstract and detached from my own cultural lens. I did not see myself in much of the literature that existed in the social/behavioral sciences. Later, in a graduate research methods course, I learned about autoethnography, a methodological approach that encourages voices from underrepresented groups and focuses on personalized narrative perspectives. I was especially interested in its emphasis on storytelling as a way of exploring and exposing complex dynamics in human life.

I discovered that I could use autoethography to tell my own stories about my unique experiences as a Vietnamese American woman. In revisiting my life in this way, I had to construct vignettes that reveal the history of my family experience, beginning with my parents' urgent departure from Vietnam as *boat people*, their struggle to adapt to a foreign country, the development of their family, the cultural and generational clashes experienced by the family, the reunification with extended family members, and establishing a local cultural identity. I chose autoethnography, using my own family, to illustrate Vietnam's history of war and conflict, economic difficulties, civil unrest, and hardship of immigrating to the U.S.

My dissertation aims to inform readers about my lived experiences and, as Chang (2008) proposed, inspires "cross-cultural coalition building" (p. 52). This is the first autoethnographic dissertation that focuses exclusively on Vietnamese American immigrants and their family dynamics. There is only one other autoethnography about Vietnamese

Americans (Wong, 2001), but the primary topic is focused on Asian Americans, not exclusively on Vietnamese Americans. The research focuses on contemporary Asian American dance theater and performance art, looking closely at the Vietnamese American performance ensemble Club O' Noodles. This study primarily investigates the stereotypes of Asians in media and exposes the conditions that marginalize Asian American artists. Both dissertations add to the ongoing research on Asian Americans in the U.S., primarily focusing on Vietnamese Americans.

In this chapter, I focus on the implications for Vietnamese American families in the U.S, implications for practice, and reflect on my personal experiences as a Vietnamese American female. Adaptation to a foreign country, development of the family, and generational clashes experienced by the family were among the many constraints Vietnamese families faced while relocating. This autoethnographic study revealed five main social dynamics for Vietnamese American families: (a) escape from civil war, (b) reliance on social support network, (c) family generational conflict between immigrants and their children, (d) loyalty to family and culture, and (e) class conflict in native country. These social dynamics represent the experiences of Vietnamese American families in the U.S. and expose the readers to the reality of living in two worlds.

Implications for Vietnamese American Families

The U.S. is a multicultural society where the resettlements of vast immigrant groups, including the Vietnamese, influenced and shaped the U.S. culture into what it is today. To escape from the civil unrest of the Vietnam War, Vietnamese refugees risked their lives in hope for a better future. The history and experiences of Vietnamese American families were reflected in the following themes: (a) process of immigration, (b) resettlement, (c) poverty,

(d) gender inequalities, (e) traditional values, (f) marriage, (g) family rituals, gathering, and food, (h) intergenerational conflict, (i) commitment to family, and (j) skin color. From these themes, the autoethnographic study revealed five main social dynamics for Vietnamese American families: (a) escape from civil war, (b) reliance on social support networks, (c) family generational conflict between immigrants and their children, (d) loyalty to family and culture, and (e) class conflict in the native country. These findings were derived from the vignettes and analyses of a Vietnamese American family living in two worlds: Vietnam and the U.S.

Many Vietnamese refugees escaped in waves to avoid the political oppression stemming from the Vietnam War. The escape of civil unrest, the first important dynamic that was found in this study relates to escaping from civil unrest. There were three major waves of Vietnamese immigration into different parts of the world. The first wave began with a small group to the U.S. in 1952, and by 1975, Vietnamese immigrants who escaped were mainly professionals. The second wave consisted of mainly "boat people" who left Vietnam in large numbers and the third wave were immigrants who left under the Orderly Departure Program and U.S. Homecoming Act. The floods of Vietnamese refugees leaving Vietnam called for refugee camps to be established in places such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Thailand. The resettlement in the United States for Vietnamese immigrants was not an easy transition. They left Vietnam leaving loved ones, belongings, and resources behind. They were immersed in the U.S. culture and had to adjust to a different way of life in the U.S.

The second social dynamic that was found in this study was that Vietnamese immigrants relied on social networks established through different sponsorship programs. Sponsors helped them with their living arrangements, enrollment in certification programs

and language classes, in addition to finding employment and becoming involved in community activities. The majority of Vietnamese families also relied on government assistance such as welfare to provide for their everyday needs. The resettlement process pushed families to look for jobs quickly and in doing so, many worked at low-paying jobs to secure an income to support their families. Although sponsorship was the U.S. solution for resettlement, Vietnamese immigrants found comfort in their own ethnic group. Even though Vietnamese immigrants were dispersed to different parts of the U.S. to avoid enclaves, they sought ways to connect with other Vietnamese immigrants to support them in their resettlement.

The third dynamic was the generational conflict experienced between Vietnamese immigrants and their Vietnamese American children. The hierarchy of gender roles in traditional Vietnamese families, influenced by Confucianism, is still apparent in today's Vietnamese American communities. However, the impact of American culture has slightly made gender roles more equitable within Vietnamese American communities. The gender discrimination that still exists in some Vietnamese American families causes conflicts and strains between family members, especially at the generational level. Vietnamese American families adapt to the U.S. lifestyle, but still hold onto their traditional values that are important to them. The generational conflicts occur when children and their parents disagree on the norms and values in their families.

Language barriers also contribute to generational conflicts. There needs to be a level of proficiency in one language in order to communicate freely. However, immigrant parents who lack English language skills have poor communication with their Vietnamese American children who lack Vietnamese language skills. This can lead to misunderstandings and

frustration when the level of communication is minimal. The breakdown in communication makes it challenging for family members to easily acculturate to U.S. customs, sometimes causing family members to emotionally and physically withdraw from the family.

The fourth implication is the loyalty to family and culture. Vietnamese immigrants arrived in the U.S. with very few belongings; however, they brought with them their cultural values, including loyalty toward family. In this study, loyalty to family can be seen in the routing of money to family members in Vietnam, even when it meant poverty for the American-based family. Loyalty can also be found among family members even when personal values are challenged. For example, when my sister and father experienced an intergenerational clash, there was a tender rekindling that followed. Loyalty can also be found across extended families where siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents come together annually to honor their ancestors. In the U.S., a large number of Vietnamese American families practice Buddhism, in addition to honoring their ancestors. During the death anniversary of an ancestor or close relative, ceremonies and rituals take place to show honor and respect. Incense is burned and food is prepared. Vietnamese American families also use this important time to gather family members together for a celebration, honoring the ones who came before us. Tradition and values are taught to younger generations during these occasions.

The fifth and last social dynamic from my study on Vietnamese American families is related to class conflict in the native country. In Vietnam, Vietnamese immigrants and their children are known as *Viet Kieu.* They are viewed as foreigners for leaving their homeland. Vietnamese immigrants do not fully fit in the Vietnamese society, nor do they fully fit in the American society. They straddle between two places they consider their homes. The

Vietnamese American children are even more conflicted when they visit the foreign country because customs are very different. In the U.S., they are exposed to many different cultures, but in Vietnam, the culture tends to be homogenous. To relatives that are unfamiliar to them, there is an expectation of monetary support because of the *Viet Kieu* status. Gender and skin color also play a role on how people are treated in Vietnam. Males have higher social status, and women with darker complexion are viewed as inferior and lower class in comparison to light and fair-skinned women. The class conflict that occurs is apparent with every visit to the native country.

Implications for Practice

My research has implications for my occupation as a K-8 educator and administrator. Education has been an important aspect of my life that I want to share with others. This study helps to inform educators about the Vietnamese American experience. Through exploring these personal accounts, I am even more culturally aware and sensitive to issues such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and family. As educators, we are obligated to promote an egalitarian society. Being raised in a low-income background, I was appalled to see the educational gaps between students who have access to resources, parental involvement, and support, versus students who do not. My educational experience in comparison to my students' educational experience leaves me wondering about the struggle that students face when it comes to dealing with issues of ethnicity, diversity, poverty and children, and student achievement. The writing of my dissertation has greatly assisted me in exploring these issues and helped me understand myself as an individual and an educator.

In my current occupation, I work with a predominantly Vietnamese and Hispanic population of children. I exercise my conversational Vietnamese language when necessary

for non-English-speaking parents and work with diverse groups of children from different social, emotional, economic, and academic backgrounds. Although this study is primarily about my life, it offers insight and knowledge around the Vietnamese culture and has helped me to relate to students with similar cultural backgrounds.

The generational differences explored in this autoethnography also contribute to the literature on Vietnamese American families. Vietnamese immigrants and their American-born children were shaped by the immersion into U.S. society. Their "path to adjustment has involved incorporating traditional values, communal solidarities, and refugee experiences into a lifestyle adapted to American ways" (Zhou & Bankston, 1998, p. 88). They were challenged in keeping their traditional cultural values while at the same time embedding American cultural values in their daily lifestyle. The generational differences led to conflicts within Vietnamese families when the children strongly want to uphold their own values that differed from their parents' traditional values.

Vietnamese American families continue to evolve from generation to generation, adding to the diversity of ethnic groups in the U.S. Personal vignettes, key in an autoethnographic study, are important in providing information lacking in current literature about Vietnamese American experiences. My experiences of straddling between two cultures, as described in the vignettes, contributes to the ongoing research. By learning about history and experiences of Vietnamese immigrant parents, Vietnamese American children such as myself will have a better understanding of their culture and embrace their own self-identity with ease, rather than with struggles. Individuals from other cultures who are first-generation in the U.S. might also identify with some of the social dynamics that were found in this study.

To further understand the social dynamics of Vietnamese American families, it is important for researchers to continue ongoing study. This dissertation is only a small fraction of the many untold stories of Vietnamese American families. Therefore, it is important for others to tell their stories to capture the untold experiences. By writing vignettes, autoethnographers can unfold their past and educate others about the experiences, interactions, and social dynamics they have encountered. This became a therapeutic process for me to release emotional strains that I have been concealing since childhood. Through my vignettes, I was able to expose and explore personal experiences that I would not share freely with others. This process may also be therapeutic for autoethnographers who have similar histories. They can come to a full understanding of how the world functions around them, in essence, breaking free of the past to become stronger and more independent individuals, and they can know that they are not alone in their experience.

In addition to vignettes, interviews of Vietnamese immigrants and their children should be conducted and evaluated. Their stories will validate or give additional insights to the ongoing research of Vietnamese Americans. The interviewing process can be approached in a number of ways. Surveys, answering specific questions, or even open-ended interviews will capture significant data for future research. Translation in Vietnamese may be needed for the older generation of immigrants. Interviews conducted with children and their parents will also help educators understand the family dynamics and social dynamics of Vietnamese American families in the school and public setting.

Figure 12. My parents now, 2011: Sau Dang (Mother) and My Nguyen (Father).

Personal Reflection

As a second-generation Vietnamese American growing up with immigrant parents, I had my challenges and rewards. As a child, I was deeply resentful, rebellious, frustrated, and embarrassed of my parents' actions and decisions. I did not fully realize the sacrifices my parents had made for our family until I was much older. Upon reflecting on my experiences growing up, I am honored, grateful, and proud to be part of such a loving Vietnamese American family. The sacrifices that my parents made immigrating to the United States are truly valued, more so now than before. They have helped mold me into a strong and independent Vietnamese American woman who is determined to make them proud. My experiences of straddling between two cultures have been difficult, yet every experience was meaningful.

My parents were not educated in the U.S. nor did they attain higher than a high school education in Vietnam. They came to the U.S. wanting more for their children. They often pushed me to excel in school even though they did not understand the educational

system. As long as my siblings and I were focusing on our academics, my parents were satisfied. My parents displayed approval by boasting about our academic successes to our extended family and friends. My siblings and I were often compared to other Vietnamese American children. They were proud of the fact that we were successful in school, which makes our family look credible among other Vietnamese American families.

By witnessing my parents' struggles to fully acclimate into mainstream society, I am now more determined to better my own future. I started college with the intentions of pursuing the medical field and ended up in the field of education at the University of California, Berkeley. During my first year, I was inspired to pursue a teaching career after mentoring underprivileged and underrepresented middle school students. The full scholarships I earned supported my tuition and living expenses and encouraged me to continue my education further.

While attending UC Berkeley, I was fortunate to have taken courses to learn more about my own culture and build further understanding of my parents' struggle in the U.S. As a young student, my education was limited to the dominant U.S. culture, and did not include much about the Vietnam War and Vietnamese immigration to the U.S. I started to learn about Vietnamese history and culture through an Ethnic Studies course offered during my first year of college. This course gave me a new appreciation for my parents' struggles and barriers in acclimating to the U.S. society. I started to become more curious about my parents' past and began to ask questions to seek answers for my curiosity.

Through my parents' stories of their escape from Vietnam, I realized the sacrifices they had made for our family. They left their family and belongings behind to escape the civil war, they drifted in the sea for two weeks, they lived in a refugee camp in Hong Kong

for 9 months, and they struggled to adjust to American life. The escape from Vietnam left many scars in our family, but it also gave us opportunities.

Over the past three decades, my parents made tremendous progress in learning how to communicate in English and they stayed firm in having their children learn Vietnamese. In a way, they were resistant to the English language as their children were resistant to the Vietnamese language. Now, years later, my parents and their children have come steps closer to bridging the communication challenges and live somewhat comfortably in two linguistic worlds. As a young person, I did not see any value in learning Vietnamese; I was eager to acclimate to the dominant American culture. Today, I am grateful for having maintained my Vietnamese language. It is a valuable part of my identity. Speaking Vietnamese has also been helpful for serving new immigrant families who arrived only recently. As a teacher in a public school system, I found it helpful to serve as a translator for Vietnamese immigrants' children who are adjusting to American culture. I see myself in their eyes and they see themselves in mine. I recognize myself as being a role model for the next generation that follows me, walking in the same steps.

My parents' burden became my burden as I became older. Multiple times a year, I am obligated to help my parents financially so they can support their families in Vietnam. Even though I am not happy with the fact that I have to give them thousands of dollars every year to support their families in Vietnam or their trips to Vietnam, I understand the financial hardships of my parents. I know my parents are ashamed to ask their children for financial support, and even though they are ashamed, they feel they have no other choice. Perhaps my parents feel they need to support their families in Vietnam because they feel guilty about running away after the Vietnam War. At times, I was resentful of my parents because they

would rather send their families in Vietnam money than support their own children in the U.S. In my culture, it is important to support one another in all capacities. My parents instilled this in me. Even when my parents ask for money to send to family in Vietnam, I cringe, but cannot say "no." I have become their enabler, supporting them and partly supporting their families in Vietnam.

Through determination, I started to break the cycle of financial struggles my parents still faced. I currently work in the educational field as a school administrator. In reflecting back on my life, I feel satisfaction with my current state. I have become an educator to young children and mentor for teachers. From my personal experiences, I hold strong beliefs about education. In the past 10 years as an educator, I often reflected on my own educational experiences and how similar or different it is from the students that I teach. I wondered how the parents of these children lived and how their home life affected their children's performance in school. I often wondered about other teachers' experiences as well. How do they perceive children with a disadvantaged background? As an educator, I am sensitive to these issues such as poverty and race because I have lived and dealt with these issues firsthand. As I continue to educate students and teachers, I hope to inspire them to find hope for change.

In the past 33 years since my parents escaped from Vietnam, little has been written about the hardships, clashes, cultural struggles, and adaptation into contemporary America. Therefore, this study contributes to the ongoing research of Vietnamese Americans in the United States.

Figure 13. My family now, 2013: Trung Nguyen (Brother), Thanh Nguyen (Sister), Cuc Nguyen (Sister), Qua Nguyen (Sister), Sau Dang (Mother), My Nguyen (Father), Phuong Nguyen (Oldest Sister), Thu Nguyen (Sister), Dong Nguyen (Sister), and Hong Nguyen (Me).

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