AFTER VIETNAM: REDEFINING HOME, CULTURAL IDENTITY AND NATIONAL BELONGING

By Carol Ann Tan, Production Dramaturg

Pictured: This sign, titled “New Horizon,” in front of Fort Chaffee showed the number of Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees who had lived at the camp and had been subsequently resettled, as well as the number still living there. Credit: UC Irvine, Southeast Asian Archive.
Most historical sources will state that the Vietnam War ended on April 30, 1975. On that day, South Vietnam surrendered, after its capital, Saigon, fell to the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong. But for many South Vietnamese, the date signals a rebirth of their national and cultural identities.

In the final days before the fall of Saigon, the United States evacuated over 130,000 South Vietnamese at risk of retaliation from the North Vietnamese government. As former officials of the South Vietnamese military or government, many of these refugees had close ties to the United States. Still, many Americans were concerned that welcoming these Vietnamese immigrants into the country might lead to increased unemployment and public welfare. A Gallup poll taken in May 1975 showed only 36 percent in favor of the action, with the majority — 54 percent — disapproving. Despite these political difficulties, President Gerald Ford believed that welcoming the refugees was the right thing to do. Under his leadership, Congress passed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975, which set aside $455 million to help resettle the Vietnamese refugees.

Refugees were initially brought to Guam, then flown to one of four military bases: Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania or Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. *Vietgone* is largely set in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas — the base that took in the largest share of the 1975 evacuees. By the end of that year, over 50,000 refugees had passed through the camp. Life in the camp was, essentially, a waiting game. Fort Chaffee was crowded, and most of the refugees had brought very little from Vietnam, which meant that everyone had to stand in long lines for essentials like food, clothing and restrooms. “There wasn’t much to do except sit around and wait to get a sponsor family,” said Le Ri, who had been relocated through Fort Chaffee. “You had time to sit and talk to others who faced the same thing as you. You met new friends. You had an opportunity to learn English.”

To leave Fort Chaffee, each refugee needed to find a sponsor: an American who would help them find housing, employment and other necessities. But because many sponsors came from out of state, refugees ended up moving all over the country. For a people that deeply valued community, this separation proved disorienting.

Unsurprisingly then, many Vietnamese immigrants would leave their sponsors over the years to converge in large metropolitan areas where they could build communities of their own. As of 2014, a majority had settled in either California (39 percent) or Texas (13 percent). Specifically, 31 percent were based in just four counties: Orange County, Santa Clara County and Los Angeles County in California; and Harris County in Texas. At least 17,000 Vietnamese are estimated to have settled in the greater Chicago area. In the city of Chicago itself, the community is concentrated around Argyle Street in Uptown, a neighborhood on the North Side; within the rest of the metropolitan area, the community can mainly be found in the north and west suburbs.
Pictured: On April 5, 1975 President Gerald Ford and First Lady Betty Ford welcomed Vietnamese orphans at the San Francisco Airport. Photographs by White House photographer David Hume Kennerly.
By December 20, 1975, the first wave of Vietnamese immigrants to America had been successfully resettled. However, a second wave would begin fleeing Vietnam by sea, driven by fear and persecution under the new Communist government. The exodus of the “boat people” began in September 1978 and peaked in June 1979, with the latter month seeing 54,000 arrivals in various countries. It’s further estimated that between 200,000 to 400,000 refugees died in the attempt. These numbers declined only after the United Nations instated the Orderly Departure Program, which helped the Vietnamese to depart the country through safer means.

Faced with a growing influx of immigrants seeking asylum, Americans inevitably developed compassion fatigue. Immigration policies slowly but surely shifted away from humanitarian empathy, and towards stricter standards in granting visas. Immigrants were expected to prove that they were political refugees fleeing actual persecution, and not economic migrants simply seeking better living conditions. Forced repatriation became the norm — a practice doubly complicated by the rising number of stateless citizens being born into the no man’s land of refugee camps.

But even those fortunate enough to be resettled would struggle with a sense of displacement and exile. Within the American narrative, Vietnamese immigrants were relatively invisible, their cultural biographies rendered inconsequential out of context. For one, the war hadn’t affected only Vietnam; it further displaced other U.S. allies all across the former French colonies of Indochina. As a result, the Southeast Asian refugees resettling in the United States in the late ‘70s to ‘80s actually consisted of a heterogeneous mix of Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian and Hmong. But despite the diverse backgrounds of the Indochinese population, most Americans would perceive them to be just “Vietnamese.” Additionally, the United States had experienced a humiliating loss during the Vietnam War, which dealt an unrelenting blow to national self-perception. The word “Vietnam” took on a radically different meaning in America — one that had nothing to do with Vietnam as a country, but instead painted Americans as the central protagonist. The Vietnamese in America would establish their new lives in the shadow of this legacy, relegated to the sidelines in a story that was rightfully also theirs.
Today, more than 40 years after the fall of Saigon, almost 2 million Vietnamese live in the United States, making them the country’s sixth largest immigrant group. In Vietnam, they’re called Viet Kieu: Vietnamese nationals living abroad who are often perceived to be more successful and more wealthy than those who never left. But in the United States, they’re Vietnamese-American: a hyphenated identity straddling two worlds that continues to explore the uncharted territory between Vietnam and America.

Our media has unfailingly covered the chronology of war in breathtaking detail. But too often we do not account for the dispossessed left behind in the wake of those wars. In 1975, President Gerald Ford enacted policies to ensure the United States would continue supporting the innocent victims of the Vietnam War, but today we lack both sustainable solutions and the political will to accommodate the increasing number of refugees across the globe who can return home only in their memories.

“It is easy now to return, but impossible to go home,” Andrew Lam writes in his book, Perfume Dreams. He was evacuated from Vietnam in April 1975. “I myself have been back to a country that was once my home but is no longer. The country I remember and yearn for is not the country I visit.”

Pictured: Class of 2016 Tuan Le receives his commissioning bars from his mother (left) and his significant other while his uncle, Maj. Ben Nguyen, looks on May 21 after the U.S. Military Academy Graduation Ceremony (U.S. Army photo by Kathy Eastwood, USMA West Point Public Affairs/released.) Photo Credit: U.S. Army.