Family Ties

Exposing the Lighter Side of the Vietnamese American Experience

by Khoi T. Luu

At home this Christmas, I was seated across from my grandmother, eating one of her famous bowls of phσ.[1]

Like all chefs and all grandmothers (or both), she likes to see the glow in my face, to hear the sighs of my delight while I eat. We sat there talking about everything from my studies in college, to Boston weather, to my love life — a young man and his grandmother, decades apart but chatting and laughing like old friends from the same village. I remember noticing the smile lines around her eyes and mouth, like gentle wrinkles on silk. And that's when it struck me: my grandmother — a seventy-two-year-old woman who's witnessed the loss of her husband, her only son, her son-in-law and her country — has survived all these tragedies, and to this day, is strong enough still to laugh and enjoy life for what it is, for what she makes of it. She is irrepressibly, incorrigibly happy. How can I not admire someone like that?

And then I remembered what Huy Thanh Cao, editor-in-chief of *Horizons*, a national magazine based in Southern California dedicated to Vietnamese issues, said in a letter to me about his Vietnamese American experience. "Somewhere along the way, I realized that to be Vietnamese means to endure." Most Vietnamese people — my grandmother and myself included — would acknowledge that suffering and enduring are, indeed, dominant themes of our national experience and character. I myself have thought, written and cried about the tragedies of our people's recent past. My family and I have experienced our burden of that collective pain, more than we ever asked for.

But must endurance be coupled with perpetual sorrow? Life does go on. My grandmother, for one, has endured, but she is also stronger for it. As for me, I have lost my father, my homeland, my roots, my childhood innocence and parts of my sanity — all because of the war. But what I do have left — and I thank my family for teaching me this — are my dignity, an ironic sense of hope and, believe it or not, my sense of humor. This is where the other part of me emerges, the part that refuses to be trampled by tragedy, the part that knows that Vietnamese people are — surprisingly — capable of smiling and laughing all the same. Most of Hollywood — and therefore the American public — might not realize this fact; consider *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Casualties of War*, *From Hollywood to Hanoi*, etc. The list of heart-rending movies about the war is endless. But, must the history of our nation, the character of our people, everything that we think, breathe and feel, be unilaterally defined by suffering and sorrow, bombs and tanks, napalm and Agent Orange, re-education gulags and refugee camps, ideologies and politics, My Lai and the Tet Offensive, perilous seas and Thai pirates? Is this, solely, the Vietnamese American experience? Or is there a whole other dimension to us, one rarely reflected in the media, books or, most important, our own self-perceptions?

I am not undermining the anguish that many Vietnamese people still feel as a result of the war. Nor am I suggesting that all Vietnamese people must heal, immediately, from the wounds of the past and start laughing for no particular reason. Most of the time, I — having lived in Vietnam until the age of seven — still carry the memories of the war and its aftermath like a secret, invisible scar inside my heart. Many other people — especially from the elder generations — need more time to heal.

Nonetheless, I want the Vietnamese expatriate community to stop for a second and appreciate some of the light-hearted and less-solemn aspects of the Vietnamese American experience. I believe that we are not a cursed people, doomed to emotional pain. The way I see things, we, as an ethnic community — and, more importantly, as human beings in general — still have a great deal to appreciate from life's levities. And this ability to laugh — at ourselves, at each other — is, I think, what makes us truly human.

The twenty-something generation of Vietnamese Americans find ourselves straddling the cultural fence. Being culturally "mixed" can be heart-wrenching at times; we all have had disagreements with our parents because they think we are not "Vietnamese" enough, and we feel they are too "traditional," on the wrong continent or obscenely anachronistic. But straddling the fence does have its advantages. All of us, whether we are conscious of it or not, have come to embrace a heterogeneous cultural identity, and this hybridization distances us from the strict polarities of "Vietnamese" and "American" culture.

Occupying this unique middle position has allowed me, throughout the years, to be very self-aware of my Vietnamese-American experience and to garner an invaluable cross-cultural perspective. Sure, being an uprooted Vietnamese has been painful at times, but, over the years, I have found comfort and strength in my ability to collect memorable observations and to laugh from them. There are not tragedies or tears here; this is, for me, the most precious and charming aspect of the Vietnamese refugee experience.

What follows is a collection of reflections, observations and anecdotes I have either written down or stored in my mind over the years. They are not polished masterpieces of philosophical musings; they are just one man's memoirs — how I see things — edited/updated from old journal entries or recently transcribed from the depths of my memory.

FAMILY TIES

Bờ Ngoại[2]

My grandmother is an incredible woman, full of love, energy and life. I've seen pictures of her from the 1930s when she was a beautiful young woman, adorned with French makeup and elegant clothing. It is hard for every man to imagine his grandmother as a young belle, but sometimes it is quite easy for me. She has, in many ways, retained the youthful energy and joie de vivre of days past, a sense of radiance that seems to contradict her position as the sage matriarch of my clan.

Grandmother has been in the States only since 1986. Before coming to America, she lived with my uncle in Canada. At present, she is part of a rare breed: a seventy-something Vietnamese semi-actively learning English. In Vietnam she had already enrolled in classes, partly because she knew she would be emigrating soon, partly because she wanted to support the teacher, an old family friend, but — if I know my grandmother correctly — mostly because she wanted to do something for self-improvement, to learn another foreign language besides French. Of course, her English is not stellar. She can barely hold a conversation. But who cares? I find it inspiring that she is even making an effort.

Three years ago, my grandmother fell down the stairs and broke her hip in the middle of the night. I was the one who found her there lying almost motionless. She said she had been on the ground unable to move for almost an hour, but that she did not want to wake up anyone in the house. When the ambulance men lifted her onto the stretcher, I saw fear in her eyes. We were all scared for her, too, but then I heard her striking up a casual conversation with one of the ambulance workers: "Hello, how are you doing? ..." And then I knew that, somehow, no matter what, my grandmother would make it. Three months later, she was back on her feet again — cooking, cleaning, laughing, spreading joy and inspiration everywhere she went.

On December 15, 1992, Grandmother became a U.S. citizen. Supposedly, she was extremely nervous the last couple weeks before her citizenship exam. She would study out loud in her broken English: "There are three branches in the U.S. government: executive, legislative, judicial ..." Too bad I was not there to witness it. I would have been so proud. When all the grandchildren came home for Christmas, my mother announced that Grandmother had passed and that she was now an "American" on paper. Then my mother joked that "Ha Nguyen" is now "Helena Nguyen." I almost believed it.

COMPANY PICNIC — AUGUST 22, 1985

My aunt Nga is an electrical engineer. Every summer Motorola invites all their employees to a company picnic at a huge amusement park. This year, after heavy debating with my parents, I finally gave in and agreed to go. It was, rather surprisingly, fun. I observed one important cultural difference: I think American notion of inviting your family to a company picnic means nuclear family, but of course we brought out the whole clan: uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, cousins, grandparents, grandchildren — the whole family tree. We were the largest family there, hands down.

And yet I felt proud of the fact that we were all there, laughing, interacting with other families, enjoying American food. The Vietnamese familial bond/clan consciousness was definitely alive and well. I don't think, though, that this means a typical Vietnamese family is somehow, always closer and more loving than an American family. More accurately, I think the perception of what constitutes a "family" is different. In terms of affection, though, it's all the same: family love is family love.

SALTY SOUP — OCTOBER 14, 1990

I've been at Harvard for a couple weeks now, but already I miss my family. I went to a Vietnamese restaurant last week with my friend Chris, who has never had Vietnamese food. I needed to make a phone call, so I left her there waiting for our appetizers, fresh spring rolls. When I came back, she had a funny look on her face and was quickly gulping down water. "You okay?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. They brought out the soup, but it's really salty and pungent."

I looked at our table. There were only small bowls of nuoc mam fish sauce for dipping our spring rolls. I laughed the kind of boyish/impish laugh that I should probably outgrow now that I'm in college. It took me five minutes — I was still laughing so hard, relishing the moment — to explain to her that nuoc mam is really a condiment, like soy sauce, not soup. Now Chris refuses to let me take her out for Vietnamese food.

WHAT A COUNTRY! — DECEMBER 28, 1992

This Christmas my mother sponsored her half-brother to America. Uncle Tuan is a highly respected gentleman, having been a professor of pharmacy at the University of Saigon. For the time being, he will stay with my aunt Nga, who lives twenty minutes away from us. Auntie Nga is vacationing in "Cali" for the holidays, so he will be in charge of the house for a couple weeks, including gathering the mail. Last night at around two A.M., he called me with a hushed yet excited tone of voice. Having studied at the University of Florida in the mid-1960s, his English is superb.

"I'm sorry to wake you up, but I have something here for Auntie Nga. You wouldn't believe this, but she just won ten million dollars!"

I tried to explain to him about junk mail, how it was all a hoax, how some American companies will do anything to grab your attention through correspondence. But he insisted: "It says right here in big, black letters. Nga Ly is the recipient of ten million dollars." After several minutes of listening to me ramble, he finally gave in, somewhat peeved: "Okay, but if she really won that sum of money, you're the one who will be blamed for letting it slip away." And then he hung up.

ETHNICIZATION: PROCESS AND CONSEQUENCES

How to Become "More Vietnamese" — February 20, 1992

I have a lot in common with my friend Andy. Our fathers were both political officials who studied at the National Institute of Administration in Saigon. They did not know each other; his father knew only of my uncle, also a graduate. Still, the bond is there, as if we're long-lost brothers. Andy has been described as "1000 percent American"; I used to be the same way, but I'm on my way back. I'm far from the ethnic expert, but I'm trying to "ethnicize" Andy. For his benefit, and my own, I've drawn up this self-help life:

TOP TEN WAYS TO BECOME "MORE VIETNAMESE" FOR THE TWENTY-SOMETHING GENERATION:
10. Wear flip-flops (*dep*) around the dorm.

9. The day after an intense workout at the gym, and your back hurts, ask your roommate or loved one to "strike your back" (*dam lung*) or "step on your back" (*dap lung*) you. They'll think you're weird, but hey, you'll feel better. Afflicted with a severe New England flu? Ask your girlfriend/boyfriend to perform cạo gió [3] acupressure on you. (He/She doesn't have to be Vietnamese to do it right.)

8. Enroll (in order of parental preference) in: medical, law, engineering, dental, or pharmacy schools. Do not become a creative writer.

7. Take up ballroom dancing. Cha-cha-cha, be-bop, tango, boston, waltz, etc. Sweep all romantic prospects off their feet.

6. Watch "Paris By Night," every entertaining edition. Then reenact the songs through karaoke. Finally and forever, hold Linda Trang Dai and Trizzy Phuong Trinh as the ideal paragons of female beauty. Or, for a change of pace, watch all ten thousand phim chuong kung fu episodes ... and then cry afterwards.

5. Answer the phone in an unaspirated, "Allo?"

4. If you're dating someone Vietnamese, and it's time to get married, do it in June.

3. Condense polysyllabic geographic words, to make it easier on the tongue. For example, "Cali," "Los," "Phila," etc.

2. Use random French words and phrases to assert familiarity with and nostalgia for the old colonial elite way of life. For example, moi, toi, pate chaud, buche de Noel, gout, maquiller, demi-saison and contre soliel.

1. Make sweeping generalizations about everything and everyone — like I'm doing in this essay.

There you have it, an intimate and light-hearted account of what it means to be a twenty-something Vietnamese American (or should I say Americanized Vietnamese?) in the 1990s.

I wish I could have painted a more balanced portrait of our collective experience. It would be intriguing to read, conversely, the memoirs of a fifty-something Vietnamese person, weaving anecdotes from a "more Vietnamese" perspective.

But I can't change the way I am. I came to America when I was seven. I remember my initial difficulties adjusting to the "American" way of life, how I longed to be a true "native." Throughout my childhood, I waited with eager anticipation for my fifteenth birthday to arrive, because on that day, I knew that — arithmetically — I would be more "American" than "Vietnamese," having spent eight years in this country compared to only seven "back there." Now, ironically, painfully, I'm trying to return to my roots, and sometimes I wish I were a "real Vietnamese," whatever that means. The road remains long and arduous, and I'll need more than a silly Top Ten list as a guide. But I think as long as I keep my sense of humor, I should be okay. Laughter, they say, is the best medicine.

Family Ties

FOOTNOTES TO WRITING

1. Phơ is a popular noodle soup dish. See the Glossary Section for a more detailed description.
2. Translation of "Bờ Ngoại": maternal grandmother.
3. Cạo gió literally translates to "wind scratch," but is termed "coining" by Western health praticitioners. Cạo gió is a common, traditional Vietnamese practice of dipping a coin in mentholated oil and vigorously rubbing it across the skin, usually one's backside, causing a mild dermabrasion. This practice is believed to release the excess force or "wind" from the body and, hence, restore balance. Cảo gió is usually used to relieve flu symptoms.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of films or movies have you seen about Vietnam? Do you believe those films give an accurate view of the Vietnamese people? Why or why not?

2. What might be some differences between a Vietnamese person and a Vietnamese American person?

3. What do you think is meant when a Vietnamese American is accused of being "too American" or "too Vietnamese?" What stereotypes make up each category?

4. What are the reasons why the author's grandmother might have changed her name form "Ha Nguyen" to "Helena Nguyen" after becoming a U.S. citizen? What are some reasons why she would not want to change it?

5. Does the author laugh at his friend Chris for supping the fish sauce because he thinks she is stupid or because he realizes she is unfamiliar with the Vietnamese culture and foods? Have you ever witnessed an immigrant being laughed at because he or she was not accustomed to some aspect of American culture? How was this immigrant perceived?

6. Do you think it is the same when a Vietnamese American jokes about his own cultural stereotypes as when a non-Vietnamese American is judged by others according to those same cultural stereotypes? How so or how not so?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Khoi Truong Luu was born in Saigon and currently lives in New York City. His stories and essays have appeared in *Not a War: American-Vietnamese Fiction, Poetry, and Essays* (Yale University Council on Southeast Asia Studies, 1997) and *Once Upon a Dream: The Vietnamese-American Experience* (Anderews and McMeel, 1995). He received his A.B. from Harvard and his M.A. in Creative Writing from Boston University. He is co-editor of *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose* (Asian American Writers' Workshop, New York, 1998). [This biography is extracted from *Watermark*.]