Ethnic Entrepreneurs and Refugee Mothers: Vietnamese Women of Little Saigon

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Introduction

The Little Saigon community, located in Westminster, California, is a well-known Vietnamese enclave forged from a series of distinct migration waves beginning in the 1970s. The first wave of refugees to arrive were those who had just escaped Viet Nam in the days immediately following the fall of Saigon to the Vietnamese Communist in late April, 1975.[1] The United States government removed these individuals from South Viet Nam quickly, as they faced imminent threat under Communist rule; many had fought against Communism or had affiliations with the United States. The Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 (IMRAA) provided the legal means to assist Vietnamese refugees in resettling in the United States.[2] The act authorized Operation Frequent Wind, a process of military evacuation of the initial 130,000 at-risk Vietnamese refugees to four scattered military bases at Camp Pendleton (California), Fort Chafee (Arkansas), Eglin Air Force Base (Florida), and Indiantown Gap (Pennsylvania). This first wave to Camp Pendleton later went on to establish

[1] Prior to the Immigration Act of 1965, the few Vietnamese who came to the U.S. were war brides or international students – these roles were the most common for many Asians, who were not allowed to legally immigrate to the United States in large numbers until after the discriminatory national quotas established by the 1924 Immigration Act were eliminated.

[2] For a history of Vietnamese immigration, see Phuong Tran Nguyen's *Becoming Refugee in America*.

the roots of Little Saigon in Westminster.[3] Alongside the first wave, the second wave Vietnamese refugees made up the primary workforce for the new Little Saigon community.

The second wave of Vietnamese refugees was not so lucky in their exodus from Viet Nam. There were no military evacuations to secure their safety or streamline the immigration process for the "boat people," who arrived in the United States from 1977 to 1979. During these years, the United States admitted over 80,000 refugees from first-asylum countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Hong Kong. The remaining waves of Vietnamese transnational migration occurred during the 1980s. The Refugee Act and Orderly Departure Program of 1980, which legalized direct migration from Viet Nam to the United States at a rate of over 40,000 refugees a year, sparked the third wave of migration. The Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1987 constituted the fourth wave, reuniting over 23,000 biracial Vietnamese children whose fathers were United States soldiers and 70,000 additional family members. The fifth and final wave began at the close of the decade, in 1989, with the Humanitarian Operation Program (HO), which granted political prisoners and their immediate family admittance to the United States.[4]

The most significant differences between the Operation Frequent Wind evacuees and all subsequent waves of refugees rested on the exiles' financial, human, and social capital. The first wave was wealthy, well-educated, and maintained firm religious affiliations that became immediate assets in the United States; of the first 130,000 refugees, half were college

[3] For a history of Westminster from 1900-1995, see Elisabeth Orr's "Living Along the Fault Line."

[4] Phuong Tran Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee in America: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 1.

graduates, two-thirds had some fluency in English, and half were Christian.[5] The remaining waves, on the other hand, primarily consisted of Chinese descendants who experienced very different economic and social conditions in Viet Nam.[6] The Vietnamese-Chinese had a long-established, tension-riddled presence in Viet Nam up until 1977 when the Communist government took forceful actions against them by limiting their work, seizing their property, and increasing threats of deadly harm against them. As a result, when these later waves of immigrants finally arrived, they were desperate to find work wherever they could; they accepted the most labor-intensive, low-paying jobs available to remain close to their community and to have the flexibility they needed to tend to their family members.

In the literature, information specific to Vietnamese migrant women with regards to Little Saigon's economic development is scant. Formal acknowledgment of their impact is virtually nonexistent when compared to the achievements of prominent Vietnamese immigrant men written about in city newspapers, websites, and archives. My research seeks to shed light on the contributions of Vietnamese women to the community of Little Saigon, thereby securing their rightful place in the Little Saigon ethnic archive. Vietnamese women, depending on their time of migration, experienced and reacted differently to war and resettlement. For the initial refugees, privilege and former capital strengthened their positions as elite women and allowed them access to a broader breadth of resources. For later waves of refugee women, work and family intermingled as a means of survival. Vietnamese women persevered in a United States context by blending Vietnamese tradition and family with free enterprise to form different economic tactics (patriarchal bargaining, downward mobility, and patchworking) and

[5] Elisabeth Orr, "Living Along the Fault Line: Community, Suburbia, and Multiethnicity in Garden Grove and Westminster, California, 1900-1995" (Doctorate's thesis, Indiana University, 1999), 13.

[6] Orr, "Living Along the Fault Line," 186.

specific childrearing strategies (stringent scheduling, and an emphasis on children's education).

Arrival in Little Saigon

Little Saigon's history reflects the impact of five waves of migration from Viet Nam, most notably the first two waves of refugee migration in the aftermath of the United States war in Viet Nam. The first refugees to arrive in the United States left improvised camps on military bases and engaged in secondary migration to Westminster, California, a city ripe for economic development. In 1978, the first four shops – Hoa Binh Market, Dr. Hoang's medical office, real estate agent and former city councilman Tony Lam's office, and Danh's pharmacy – appeared on Bolsa Avenue, in what would later be called 'Little Saigon.'[7] The first wave of Vietnamese refugees established a new ethnic enclave by accessing liberal state relief, purchasing relatively cheap land, and utilizing their pre-existing wealth.[8] The substantial state assistance included two actions taken by Governor Jerry Brown. The first occurred in 1975 and made college free for refugees at the junior-college level and at the University of California. The second took place in 1980 and rendered qualifying refugees eligible for Medi-Cal and other social safety net programs.[9]

Furthermore throughout the 1970s several trends primed Westminster for significant changes: the United States birthrate slowed considerably, the

[7] Orr, "Living Along the Fault Line," 197.

[8] Danh Nhut Quach, interview by Michelle Pham, May 6, 2012, Community Interviews Collection, *Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC Irvine*, Southeast Asian Archive (SEAA), 20-23.

[9] Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee in America*, 74. Nguyen discusses the economic impact of access to Medi-Cal for Vietnamese medical providers. This statewide initiative benefited Vietnamese doctors – part of the first wave elites - directly as their lower income counterparts constitutes viable clients with the financial support of the government.

children of the city grew up and moved elsewhere, and the city's dependence on property taxes came to an abrupt halt with the passage of Proposition 13, a piece of 1978 legislation that froze property taxes at the 1976 rate.[10] Additionally, the tract homes in Westminster that had been so appealing in the post-WWII baby boom era had gone into a rapid state of decline, making new residents scarce and further leaving the city in a precarious financial state.[11] Together, these factors created the conditions that allowed Little Saigon to emerge and the Vietnamese community to become Westminster city's saving grace. While the first wave of refugees provided the possibility for the city to recoup, the near-constant influx of Vietnamese immigrants throughout the 1980s changed Little Saigon into a major resettlement location. The 1980s saw immense growth for the Vietnamese community – Orange County (where Westminster is located) had the highest number of Vietnamese immigrants in the nation (85,238 in 1980 alone) and boasted more than 100 new businesses by 1982.[12] Memorable business accomplishments of the 1980s include the creation of the Vietnamese American Chamber of Commerce in 1980 and the completion of the Asian Garden Mall in 1987. As business boomed and brought economic prosperity back to the area, these developments solidified the Vietnamese community's place in Westminster and served as a cultural hotspot for the refugee population to access vital resources that recreated aspects of their homeland. In 1988, after extensive lobbying efforts by refugees that constituted the Vietnamese elite, the Westminster City Council officially recognized Little Saigon as a California tourist attraction

[10] Orr, "Living Along the Fault Line," 180.

[11] Ibid., 10.

[12] Nam Q. Ha, "Business and Politics in Little Saigon, California," (Houston, Texas: Rice University, 2002), 11; Orr, "Living Along the Fault Line," 196-97.

and Governor George Deukmeijian unveiled Little Saigon freeway signs declaring it so.[13]

With the arrival of the 1990s, the drawbacks of a stratified ethnic economy were revealed as immigration halted due to new international immigration policies. Demand for saturated industry businesses like restaurants, beauty parlors, garment work, and jewelry diminished within the ethnically-concentrated 1.5-mile stretch along Bolsa Avenue. The overall decline in demand exacerbated already terrible work conditions for Vietnamese immigrants across industries and intensified the adverse financial and health outcomes for those that arrived in later waves. For those within the first wave, however, these changes solidified their standing as political insiders, especially men. Having established themselves financially in the creation of Little Saigon, they positioned themselves as community leaders to other Vietnamese refugees, appealed to white voters as business entrepreneurs, and served as community liaisons for both. These first wave men leveraged their assets, which included the emotional and household support of their wives, to launch successful mainstream political campaigns in the 1990s and, in doing so, formally strengthened their community positions and places in local history.[14]

Literature Review and Methodology

To adequately document women's history, it is vital to incorporate interdisciplinary work, especially from the sociological and cultural studies fields. A book by Offen et al., *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives* (1991), asserts that the frameworks and concepts developed in these other disciplines effectively illustrate the connections between society, family, and patriarchy that are so relevant to understanding gender. One interdisciplinary concept borrowed from sociology is that of

[13] Ha, "Business and Politics in Little Saigon, California," 30.

[14] Ibid., 24.

dichotomous gendered spheres that uphold cultural norms. This is the pervasive idea that the public sphere where politics, business, and social ventures occur remain the sole domain of men, whereas the private sphere, in which domestic work like cooking, cleaning, childrearing, and other service-based work takes place, is the sole domain of women.[15] The distinction between these two realms was first applied to historical examinations of white womanhood in Victorian England, but later scholarship has extended similar observations to the examination of gendered work regarding other cultural groups.[16]

After reading Offen et al., I then considered the significant gap in women's representation in the archives and literature on the Vietnamese exodus and the establishment of the Little Saigon community which mirrors this concept of dichotomous gendered spheres. While the absence of women also stood out to me as indicative of the traditional gender roles customary in the Vietnamese family system, the confinement of women to domestic work became slightly less prevalent with the development of Little Saigon. Minor changes to the economic needs of the immediate household, international family, language barriers, and Vietnamese exclusion from mainstream society began to alter some aspects of the primarily male-dominated business model. Women not only worked in the background, unseen and unheard, but some began developing greater public presence, albeit in niche and service-oriented occupations to supplement family income by capitalizing on their domestic skillset. Further contributing to the emergence of Vietnamese migrant women from the private sphere was the

[15] K.M. Offen, Pierson R.R., and Rendall J, *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1991).

[16] Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederic Lawrence (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989.

value placed on entrepreneurship within American capitalist society, pushing Vietnamese women to reconsider their traditional societal roles.

In keeping with my interdisciplinary investigation of women's roles in Little Saigon, I found further inspiration in the intersectional framework articulated by Yen Le Espiritu in *Asian American Women and Men* (2008). In this work, Espiritu discusses the oppression of women of color, specifically Asian American women, through contemporary and cultural venues including formal, legally regulated labor markets and informal, unregulated labor markets. Researching gender in immigrant communities, Espiritu describes how gender, race, and even class impact the societal roles that women and men of color perpetuate. Espiritu identifies specific economic strategies I found relevant to Vietnamese women: prioritization of male family member's vocational training, preference for Vietnamese employers to compensate for English deficiency, and employment of the familial 'unemployable' in private businesses to offset living expenditures. From this, a more nuanced lens developed through which to analyze the work undertaken by Vietnamese women across multiple waves of migration.

Studies of other Asian immigrant communities tend to relay five critical concepts—prior class status, government assistance, patriarchal bargaining, patchworking, and educational attainment—which I also employ in my research of Vietnamese women in Little Saigon. Nazli Kibria's book, *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans*, is an ethnographic study of Vietnamese immigrants in inner-city Philadelphia from 1983-85. Kibria's data revealed that the Vietnamese exodus to the United States led to a more significant change for Vietnamese men than women, though not significant to significantly alter the traditional dynamic of the Vietnamese family system. In this study, Kibria introduced the concept of patriarchal bargaining—the idea that with increased economic contributions to the household, women alter how they partner with their husbands. Furthermore, Kibria highlights the concept of patchworking, a cooperative system of living that benefits the entire family via pooled

resources.[17] The economic situations of these families in Philadelphia were comparable to those in Little Saigon in that they relied upon four main economic coping strategies: prior class status, government assistance, patriarchal bargaining, and patchworking. Complementing these tools is Angie Chung's work, *Saving Face* (2016), which identified United States-based educational attainment as a new filial obligation through which Asian immigrant mothers could renegotiate their cultural perspectives on successful motherhood.[18] Together, these five concepts form the theoretical framework for my research concerning Vietnamese women in Little Saigon.

My research aims to understand the roles of Vietnamese women in the development and sustainment of the Little Saigon community and includes the following sources: archival material, an oral history collection, three personal interviews, and visual media depictions of Vietnamese women. Archival materials from Special Collections and the Southeast Asian Archive at the University of California, Irvine (UCI) campus were used for corroborating evidence regarding the events and persons whose lives were discussed in the interviews cited; I also relied on newspaper clippings from local papers, such as the *Orange County Register* and *The Los Angeles (LA) Times,* as well as a Hong Kong-based publication named the *South China Morning Post*. These sources provide greater historical context and yield insight into individual businesses, including those established by women.

Oral histories that supplemented my interviews for this project came directly from the extensive collection of first-generation Vietnamese refugee interviews contained in the *Viet Stories* compilation. This collection of over 200 interviews, initiated by the Asian American Studies department at the UCI campus in 2011, is the second most extensive collection of oral

[17] Nazli Kibria, *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[18] Angie Y. Chung, *Saving Face: The Emotional Costs of the Asian Immigrant Family Myth* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

interviews in the United States.[19] Furthermore, the personal interviews I conducted involved three first-generation Vietnamese refugee women who lived or still live near the Little Saigon community in Westminster and who arrived there between 1980 and 1992. Though I initially wanted to conduct interviews with more women, some expressed that they were "too busy working," "too shy," "wouldn't know what to say," and "didn't think that their stories were important." The three women I interviewed are acquaintances of a family member and agreed to do these interviews as a favor. I specifically asked these women to describe their migration experiences, childrearing practices, household responsibilities, and economic activities.[20]

Finally, I also make use of two visual media sources in my research: *Journey from the Fall*, a 2006 fictitious account of Vietnamese migration crafted from the stories of real individuals, and *Painted Nails*, a 2015 documentary about a Vietnamese female business owner's struggle for better working conditions.[21] The indie film *Journey from the Fall*, written and directed by Tran Ham, depicts the perspective of a Southern Vietnamese family on North Vietnamese reeducation camps, the boat people exodus in 1975, and their life in Southern California. The plot is pieced together from a series of personal interviews Tran Ham conducted with over 400 Vietnamese refugees from the boat people exodus. Ham's film also portrays the family's endurance despite a significant personal loss. The father dies in an attempted escape from a reeducation camp, and the grandmother, mother, and son are left to navigate life in a foreign country while coping with the traumas and anxieties of their collective past.

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[19] *Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC Irvine*, UC Irvine Libraries Southeast Asian Archive (SEAA).

[20] Diane Nguyen [pseud.], interview by author (Westminster, California, July 22, 2018); Michelle Vo [pseud.], interview by author (Westminster, California, July 30, 2018); Lara Tran [pseud.], interview by author (Costa Mesa, California, July 14, 2018).

[21] *Journey from the Fall*, directed by Tran Ham (2006, A Fire in the Lake, film).

The other film, *Painted Nails*, records the partial journey of a Vietnamese refugee woman and nail salon owner, Van Hoang, as she adopted a public community advocacy role in San Francisco.[22] This documentary follows Van as she learned that her place of business perpetuated a public health issue due to the fact that her products contained toxic ingredients that negatively impacted her health and the health of her employees and their families. Van emerged as an activist who fought for more stringent safety standards to regulate cosmetic product ingredients. In the documentary, Van, along with her employees and family members, make apparent the sacrifices and risks taken by those working in an industry primarily staffed by Vietnamese immigrant women. We see not only Van's sacrifices, but also her Spartan determination for success, effective political advocacy, and the intertwined nature of work and home with regards to Van's nail salon ownership. Van embodies the occupational and familial roles faced by many Vietnamese women in Little Saigon.

First Wave Vietnamese Women

While most refugees from Viet Nam left their whole livelihood behind and had to start from nothing in the United States, the first wave of women refugees retained traces of their preexisting financial and social capital when they resettled. Benefiting greatly from their education, social connections, and government assistance, first wave refugees tended to be more economically successful than later waves and were able to achieve a degree of family and cultural preservation.[23] For example, resettlement in Westminster created opportunities for these women to engage in philanthropic work within their community. Furthermore, these women used their societal and class privileges to develop and promote Vietnamese language retention and to contribute to the cultural production of female

[22] *Painted Nails*, directed by Griffin Diane and Erica Jordan (2016, DigAll Media, documentary).

[23] Kibria, *Family Tightrope,* 14.

heroines within Vietnamese communities. Teresa Nguyen Tuyet Long's life, recorded in the oral histories at UCI, was one such example.

Teresa was a mother, wife, and college graduate who fled to Westminster, California in 1975. She came from a prosperous family and attended college before marrying a devout Catholic. In Westminster, her husband became the president of a Vietnamese Catholic parish. After witnessing her children lose their ability to speak Vietnamese, she sought to preserve the Vietnamese language for all Vietnamese children. In 1978, she acted on this mission by creating the Hong Bang Vietnamese Language Center in Westminster. For over a decade, Teresa not only oversaw the administrative duties of the organization, but she made door-to-door house calls, drove children to classes, and trained teachers. Enlisting her husband's assistance by capitalizing on his position in the community, she secured classroom space within the church and utilized her network to grow the organization. By 1992, her organization had over forty centers, 5,000 students, and 300 to 400 teachers.[24] Teresa may have been a refugee, but the financial security afforded through her family's former prosperity allowed her to invest significant personal time and money into her organization instead of on her own survival. Although her decision to operate language schools was shaped by being removed from Viet Nam, she found herself at the center of community service and language preservation, doing work that still aligned in many ways with her domestic duties and social role as a woman in Vietnamese society.

Cultural preservation played a significant role in the lives of women from the first wave. Vu Boi Tu, a Vietnamese woman also documented in the oral histories, was from an upper-middle-class background and had

[24] Teresa Nguyen Tuyet Long, interview, *The Vietnamese Community in Orange County: An Oral History*, eds. Donna Minick and Vo Kim Son, trans. Vo Thi, Minh Van, vol. 4 Preservation of Cultural Heritage and the Vietnamese Media (Santa Ana: The Intercultural Development Center, Office of International Education and Exchange, Division of Student Affairs, California State University, Fullerton and Newhope Branch of Santa Ana Public Library, 1992), 118-136.

attended Trung Vuong High School (one of two all-girl high schools at that time) in Viet Nam. During the war, her husband was a dentist in the 74th Regiment of the South Vietnamese army. In 1975, they fled to Westminster together to avoid persecution for her husband's service in the Southern forces. While adjusting to her new life in California, Tu reconnected with old friends and alumni from her all-girls school. Tu's oral interview records her description of an unfulfilled "mental need" that manifested itself in the need for a legacy for Vietnamese children born overseas.[25] Unhindered by financial need that many Vietnamese women experienced, Tu painstakingly tracked down her scattered high school acquaintances in the United States. In 1983, Tu also created a committee of first-generation Vietnamese women who planned a ceremony to honor the Trung sisters (known in Vietnamese as *Hai Ba Trung*), Vietnamese heroines who fought against the Chinese in circa 40 A.D. to avenge the wrongful death of one of the Trung sister's husbands. Following its inaugural performance in March of 1983, the event Tu helped create, named "Commemoration of the Two Sisters," eventually became an annual tradition in Little Saigon.[26] While Teresa focused on preserving the Vietnamese language to reinforce the heritage of Vietnamese youths, Tu dedicated herself to the preservation of the Trung sisters' legacy as a component of Vietnamese mythology and cultural heritage. Both women represent the embodiment of Vietnamese womanhood in pursuit of different, but parallel, efforts to preserve Vietnamese culture in Little Saigon. As some of the first Vietnamese woman refugees in Westminster, Teresa and Tu's volunteerism can also be described as a manifestation of their womanly and motherly duties to preserve harmony within the Vietnamese family system.

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[25] Tu Boi Vu, interview, *The Vietnamese Community in Orange County*, 156.

[26] The event included a variety show, musical performances, and a historically based drama called *Keeping Up The Border Post (Tran Thu Luu Don)*. Following the entertainment was the Procession of Trung Sisters – played by two "virtuous as well as pretty" girls.

Economic Strategies

Unlike the Vietnamese women of the first wave, Vietnamese women who arrived in the later waves of migration (in the 1980s to the 1990s) spent a majority of their time struggling to make ends meet. As a result, most could not afford the time or capital to make significant contributions to the Little Saigon community. Unemployment rates for the different migration waves reveal that those in the initial wave had a six percent unemployment rate, whereas those who arrived in 1983 alone faced a staggering thirty-five percent unemployment rate. Additionally, a 1985 study found that the median annual income for Vietnamese immigrants was $12,800, while Asian Americans at large earned $23,600, and white Americans earned $20,800.[27] For women who arrived in later waves, their stories reflect the stark difference in opportunities available to Vietnamese women compared to those who arrived in the first wave. According to a founder of the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce, survival needs drove subsequent waves of Vietnamese immigrant women to work in jobs that required no formal training and that involved low startup costs in laborious occupations, such as restaurant work, customer service work, household work, cosmetology, and garment work.[28] This reality corresponds with Espiritu's finding that, in immigrant communities, gender expectations and suitable work opportunities are informed by the intersectional considerations of class. To understand women's economic realities during this decade, it is essential to highlight the numerous factors that influenced women's economic decisions.

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[27] "Love Thy Neighbor? Vietnamese: Success and destitution both are common," *The Orange County Register*, May 12, 1986, box 7, folder 7, Project Ngoc Records," Southeast Asian Archive (SEAA).

[28] Tu Boi Vu, interview, *The Vietnamese Community in Orange County: An Oral History*, vol. 4, 142.

Vietnamese women of the later waves did not simply eschew high grossing jobs and educational opportunities in their respective fields, but deliberately chose fields that allowed them flexibility, such as time off from work for their families or the ability to bring their children to work. Women's household obligations and childrearing priorities were heavily influenced by Confucian ideals that originated thousands of years before in China and Viet Nam. As a result, the types of work Vietnamese women pursued and accepted was the result of a painstaking renegotiation of Vietnamese womanhood with labor. Diane Nguyen, one of the three women I interviewed for this project, immigrated to Westminster in 1991 under the sponsorship of her in-laws. By then, Diane was already a mother of two sons and the wife of a Chinese-Vietnamese man. In Viet Nam, she had earned a degree as a Lab Technician, but, after immigrating to the United States, she accepted a job in subcontracted garment work as a seamstress. Operating from her home, Diane earned enough money to get her family through their first two years in the United States. Ethnic employers customarily paid lower wages to Vietnamese women like Diane, who accepted this compromise in exchange for the convenience of transactions in her native language and the at-home flexibility that afforded her the opportunity to raise her two children.[29] During her second year of seamstress work, Diane's husband left to work in Alaska, where he received a better salary than that was available to him in Westminster at the time. As a single mother of sorts, Diane disclosed that she woke up at 6 AM each morning to take her children to school, attended language courses for five hours at a local community college, and then returned to the household to resume her motherly duties. Diane completed her garment work only after the boys' bedtime, between the evening hours of seven and midnight.[30] Though she described seamstress work as awful, the advantages of being able to work around her schedule, to receive unreported wages, and to avoid

[29] Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love*, 2nd ed, The Gender Lens Series (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 85.

[30] Diane Nguyen [pseud.], interview.

speaking English made this work bearable. Diane's family was typical of the dual-worker family, in which the husband worked in the semi-skilled or unskilled sector, and the wife was employed in a garment or assembly line.[31] Under these conditions, saving money became an absolute necessity to advance to the next stage of Diane's family plan: sending her husband back to a one-year recertification program to resume his work as a lab technician. This plan, indicative of a more significant cultural trend, is known as the "patriarchal bargain" and is discussed below, along with the two related strategies of downward occupational mobility and patchworking.

Angie Chung (2016) noted that this community trend of women's downward occupational mobility stemmed from limited English proficiency, limited financial resources, and the formal social networks that characterized later waves of Vietnamese immigrants and refugees. Chung observed that together, these obstacles made it more difficult for immigrants to complete the necessary certifications to attain jobs in the United States comparable to those they once held in Viet Nam.[32] Within family units, emphasis on retraining and re-education was prioritized for the men of the household when possible, regardless of the women's prior education level. Women were expected to not only accept menial, low-paying work to help pay for their husbands' education but also to compensate for the added disadvantage of being cut off from extended family members. Kibria refers to this phenomenon as the economic strategy of the "patriarchal bargain." Furthermore, while husbands engaged in taking work where available, maximizing potential for home-business ventures and combining different family members' earnings to stabilize the entire family, Vietnamese migrant women were responsible for childrearing and the transmission of cultural traditions and language within the family.

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[31] Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 78.

[32] Angie Y. Chung, *Saving Face: The Emotional Costs of the Asian Immigrant Family Myth* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 31.

The collective effort to pool resources, also known as patchworking, is an important economic strategy transplanted from Viet Nam—commonly found within urban extended families and rural villages—that allowed Vietnamese households to maximize the household's income to afford large purchases and investments, an otherwise impossible task for migrant individuals. The strategy of patchworking repeatedly surfaced not only in the interviews I conducted but also in the archives I encountered in the completion of this project. One woman whose narrative I came across in the SEA Archives stood out as an example of international patchworking. Mai Nguyen, featured in a *Los Angeles Times* article, worked as a seamstress in 1987, and earned an hourly wage of $1.75 during her fourteen-hour shifts, amounting to a total of $24.50 at the end of each grueling workday.[33] Though dismally low, working in garment factories meant earning a wage anywhere from fifteen to twenty times higher than those earned in post-war Viet Nam. Her meager savings went towards remittances that supported her family in Viet Nam, including her mother-in-law and her daughter.[34] Chipping in financial resources, such as through remittances and small loans, to improve the lives of family members back home represents Kibria's patchworking strategy applied at an international level. Many first-generation Vietnamese women reasoned that, despite the arduous work, the capital available in the United States constituted their only opportunity to contribute more to the household.

Until as late as 1995, diplomatic relations between the United States and Viet Nam were virtually nonexistent, and Viet Nam did not openly trade on the global market until 1986 (nine years after the end of the Vietnam War).[35] Even in the late 1990s, Vietnamese migrants who had returned to Viet Nam

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[33] California minimum wage in 1987 was $3.25.

[34] Mark Arax, "Refugees Called Victims and Perpetrators of Fraud," Los Angeles Times, Feb. 10, 1987. "Project Ngoc Records." Southeast Asian Archive, University of California, Irvine Library, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, 1995.

[35] Hung Cam Thai, *Insufficient Funds: The Culture of Money in Low-Wage Transnational Families* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 12.

relayed the message that living conditions in the motherland lacked essential commodities comparable to Western standards, like clean water, medication, and safe meat.[36] The obstacles Vietnamese women of the later waves faced as new immigrants—the lack of training, education, and English fluency—coupled with their direct responsibilities (including transnational familial needs) curtailed their independence and pressured them to accept these menial opportunities with little (if any) resistance. These women were compelled to fulfill the obligation of providing for their loved ones back in Viet Nam by sending remittances. According to Hung Cam Thai, the only way overseas immigrants participated in their distant households was proxied through the money they sent home; interviews with non-migrant Vietnamese indicate that the only way for their United States-relocated relatives to stay in good standing within the family was through remittances.[37] Due to these cultural expectations, the value of remittances sent through Vietnamese owned businesses comprised of over fifty percent of the Little Saigon economy.[38]

Before the 1994 lift on the Viet Nam embargo, remittance packages sent to Viet Nam could not exceed $500 in value. For the Vietnamese who stayed behind, millions of dollars' worth of items ($200 million in 1984 alone) traveled through local shops like Danh's Pharmacy, which charged a twenty percent fee to send money or items abroad. In these remittance shops in Little Saigon, items ranging from scooters to lawnmower engines awaited pickup by a courier and were shipped indirectly to Viet Nam via France. For the recipient families, item remittances fetched hefty sums if sold on the black market when the embargo and years of economic recession deprived

[36] Hung Cam Thai, *Insufficient Funds*, 64.

[37] Ibid., 43.

[38] Mark Arax, "Refugees Called Victims and Perpetrators of Fraud," Los Angeles Times, Feb. 10, 1987. "Project Ngoc Records." Southeast Asian Archive, University of California, Irvine Library, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, 1995.

citizens of many essential needs.[39] Similar strategies of resource-sharing emerged within Vietnamese immigrant communities as well. Thuyet Nguyen, whose experience is documented in the Southeast Asian Archives, came from a military family and was the wife of a former pilot in southern Viet Nam. She came to the United States as part of the boat people exodus and initially settled in Texas. Thuyet later reunited with her maternal family in Orange County, where she combined her savings with private loans from family members and opened a restaurant named "Thanh My." Nearly her entire staff (other than two part-timers) was composed of family members.[40] Thuyet was not alone in using family as staff. A study conducted in 1994 found that seventy percent of Asian American businesses in the United States did not have a single non-relative employee.[41] These restaurants, like Thuyet's, relied on family members to sustain a moderate income by incorporating unpaid labor via otherwise unemployable personnel that included young children and the elderly. Employing family members allowed for lower start-up and labor costs, which helped businesses maintain the low prices typical to the ethnic restaurants along Bolsa Ave. This cyclical pattern of charging less to stimulate patronage could only have been achieved through unpaid familial labor and self-exploitation.[42] As women selected a familiar environment for their workplace, they forfeited the potential economic benefits of managing successful and lucrative businesses. For Vietnamese mothers, the intangible aspects of work life (like family proximity and schedule flexibility) trumped profit margins. In her restaurant, Thuyet worked thirteen hours a day on weekdays and sixteen

[39] Jeffrey Brody, "PIPELINE TO VIETNAM – Refugees in OC often violate US trade embargo by shipping parcels to relatives overseas – Millions in goods, cash flow abroad," *Orange County Register, The (Santa Ana)*, August 21, 1988.

[40] Marshall Ingwerson, "Refugees busily reshaping lives," *South China Morning Post*, February 21, 1982, box 2, scrapbook 5, Cynthia Glegge Bashall Scrapbooks, Southeast Asian Archive (SEAA).

[41] Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 83.

[42] Ibid., 76.

hours a day on weekends to offset high costs. Thuyet's priority was not to have the best restaurant in town. Instead, she pursued entrepreneurship in service of her family; her primary concerns were caring for her family and their economic well-being.[43] In her renegotiation of motherhood, her business site acted as another home in which she could effectively raise her children as she saw fit, but also contribute to raising enough money for the family. Similar arrangements of immigrant businesses operating as second homes can also be found in the documentary *Painted Nails.*

Thuyet Nguyen and Van Hoang's stories demonstrate that many immigrant businesses (many of which are also family businesses) exist as an extension of the household such that Vietnamese immigrant women's main priority—the preservation of the family—endured to fit the circumstances of their new lives abroad.[44] Both women developed their workplaces and scheduled their long working hours to accommodate the increased demands of working while raising their children.

Renegotiation of Traditional Vietnamese Motherhood

Ideal Vietnamese motherhood traditionally revolves around the household and child-rearing duties, passively catering to male relatives and maintaining a minimal public presence. However, Vietnamese motherhood adapted as women confronted the harsh realities of war, migration, and resettlement in a foreign country. These factors resulted in Vietnamese women renegotiating traditional practices of motherhood to economically contribute to the family in addition to fulfilling their motherly obligations. In addition to their work, some mothers also adopted stricter methods of childhood supervision, demanding high educational performance from their children so that they could access new legal avenues to higher education within the United States. Angie Chung writes that many parents' investments in their children were only possible through their efforts within

[43] Marshall Ingwerson, "Refugees busily reshaping lives."

[44] *Painted Nails*, directed by Griffin Diane and Erica Jordan (2016, DigAll Media, documentary).

the workplace. While some mothers could not be directly involved in their children's lives due to a lack of time, money, cultural knowledge, and English fluency, they hoped that their sacrifices outside of the household in the workplace demonstrated their values and commitment to their children.[45] Chau Huyen Do, an immigrant who settled in Westminster in 1992, pursued her former career as a teacher after attaining a certificate in pre-school education. In her actions, she hoped her sons found valuable lessons:

> *...Parents teach children through their action. Because actions are more important than words, you know that. You can say many beautiful things, but you don't show what, what you teach in your actions, it's useless. They look at me, they saw me, they saw the fighting spirit in me. They saw how I survive. And I think that's a good lesson for them instead of telling them a lot. Because they must succeed in everything with their eyes, with their ears, and with their perception.*

Teaching has always been viable work for Vietnamese women because it resembles the role that mothers fulfill in the household. For Chau, teaching was her passion and a continuation of her work from Viet Nam. However, her professional and motherly choice simultaneously represented a divergence from the values of traditional Vietnamese motherhood within the new context of resettlement. While other mothers worked within the parameters of their family lives, Chau prioritized her education and personal attainment. In doing so, she redefined the idea of motherhood by creating opportunities for herself while she carried on her duties as a mother. She resolved this contradiction, however, by establishing her personal attainment as means to set a positive example for her sons. Inspired by her

[45] Angie Y. Chung, *Saving Face*, 32.

work ethic, one of her sons eventually achieved office as mayor of Westminster City.[46]

Other approaches to motherhood shifted with women's response to the uncontrollable aspects of immigration and physical and emotional relocation. For these women, it was not enough to expect their children to model good behaviors, particularly when the United States shared certain cultural values, police and government forces, and urban youth gangs that were uncomfortably unfamiliar to their former lives in Viet Nam.[47] However, a cultural disconnect unsurprisingly evolved between immigrant parents and younger generations who could not relate to many of the struggles that their refugee mothers endured before, during, and after migration. All three of the women I interviewed were mothers at the time of their migration and all adopted strategies for motherhood in the United States that embraced strict scheduling of their children's lives. These mothers also insisted that their children stay within the home as much as possible, believing that their children would be safe from exposure to gangs and corrupt law enforcement.[48]

Michelle Vo, the second Vietnamese refugee mother I interviewed, recited from memory her children's schedules to show how their meals, bedtimes, and personal time were pre-planned. Within her household, even the children's computers were separated by task—one for study and the other for games—to help her organize their time when she was unable to supervise her children's activities directly.[49] Diane, a mother of two, also

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[46] Chau Huyen Do, interview by Tram Le, January 5, 2015, p. 8, Tram Le Oral Histories Collection, *Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC Irvine*, Southeast Asian Archive (SEAA).

[47] "Little Saigon is declared a tourist, commercial district," *Orange County Register, The (Santa Ana)*, February 10, 1988; Michelle Vo [pseud.], interview.

[48] Lara Tran [pseud.], interview; Diane Nguyen [pseud.], interview; Michelle Vo [pseud.], interview.

[49] Michelle Vo [pseud.], interview.

strictly regulated her children's schedules and established a firm 6 PM curfew for the boys. Once, when her older son stayed out past his curfew, she and his younger brother sat outside in the cold until he returned home. Diane's intention was not to punish the younger son but to demonstrate the impact that one family member's actions had on the rest of the family, a lesson not quickly forgotten.[50]

Lara Tran, the last of the refugee mothers I interviewed, clearly identified the lack of economic and family support previously available in Viet Nam as most influential in her decision to restrict the movements of her children outside the home. Back in Viet Nam, she depended upon extended family support, especially her mother's assistance, in housework and childcare. Living in a new country that lacked this familial foundation led to her decision to confine her family to the Little Saigon area that was, by the 1990s, a self-sustaining community with businesses that included grocery stores, legal services, and medical care administered by other Vietnamese refugees. A single mother, Lara survived by working and living within this bubble and isolated her family from surrounding communities. Also the sole working adult in her household of three, Lara not only lacked the financial means to establish a fund for potential family emergencies (as everything already went into sustaining her household) but also lacked proficiency in English and the knowledge and confidence to utilize local freeway systems. For Lara and other Vietnamese refugee women, stringent parenting and emphasis on staying within the bounds of a supervised physical environment was the culmination of the limited financial and social abilities of these women, many of whom operated with linguistic and cultural deficits.

A final shift in the expression of Vietnamese motherhood occurred when many Vietnamese refugee mothers accepted downward mobility, casting aside their former social roles or status in Viet Nam, to provide their

[50] Diane Nguyen [pseud.], interview.

children with American educational opportunities considered imprudent for themselves. These mothers sacrificed their educational prospects to conserve the limited resources of time and money that they felt would not be recouped due to discrepancies in credit transferability from their education in Viet Nam. For Lara Tran, her four-year degree from Viet Nam translated to only one year's worth of credits. While other Vietnamese families with two working adults might have been able to send at least one person back to school (often the husband), her circumstances precluded this outcome for herself. Wanting her children to be free of the difficulties she experienced, Lara took advantage of the educational grants, scholarships, and loans afforded in the United States that did not exist in Viet Nam for her children. Angie Chung's *Saving Face* extensively documents this emphasis by Asian immigrant families on their children attaining higher education. Chung's work specifically covered Chinese and Korean children of immigrants as they came to understand their parents' hardships through exposure to their day-to-day ordeals. These children were raised with the understanding that higher education represented a filial obligation and a necessary generational repayment to compensate for their parents' losses.

A possible and likely result of this emphasis on educational attainment, Asian Americans have the highest college graduation rate among any racial group. According to a study published in 2017 by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, the research division of the nationally recognized educational services provider, Asian heritage students graduate at a rate of fifty-one percent, the highest among all the races studied (Black, Hispanic, and White).[51] Vietnamese students are included in this aggregate data, as academic achievement has always been a priority for mothers like Michelle Vo. Within Michelle's household, she practiced not only stringent

[51] D. Shapiro, A. Dundar, F. Huie, P. Wakhungu, X. Yuan, A. Nathan and Y., A. Hwang, *Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates by Race and Ethnicity – Fall 2010 Cohort,* no. 12b (Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center).

scheduling, but also fought with her husband to send their children to private school. To afford tuition, the duo resolved to work two jobs each, sacrificing their personal time to commute a long distance for overnight shifts.[52] In Michelle's case, the household became a contestation ground where Michelle asserted her agency to help ensure her children's future economic prosperity.

Conclusion

Little Saigon in Westminster, California remains home to many Vietnamese immigrants and Vietnamese Americans. It grew from an isolated and nearly-lifeless community on the brink of extinction to a bustling, ethnic enclave within the span of two decades. Within Little Saigon, thousands of Vietnamese women survived distinct waves of grueling migrations from Viet Nam to the United States. Many made great sacrifices, forgoing their personal education, career, and time to raise their children and uphold centuries-old Vietnamese ideals of motherhood. Although some women turned to unique compromises between Vietnamese motherhood and meeting financial obligations related to their children and transnational family, the traditional Vietnamese family dynamic persisted. Despite these obstacles and circumstances, Vietnamese women adapted to life in the United States by employing several economic strategies, such as the patriarchal bargain, patchworking, and the acceptance of downward mobility to make the most for their families with the least resources. These strategies employed by Vietnamese mothers were supplemented by different childrearing strategies, including personal demonstration of work ethic, stringent scheduling, and conveying the importance of higher education. Many of these practices remain relevant to the life of Vietnamese immigrant women in Little Saigon today.

[52] Michelle Vo [pseud.], interview.

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