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Eric Pham
epham10@uw.edu

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Tôi Là Người Viet (I am Vietnamese): The Construction of Third-Wave Vietnamese Identity in
the United States

A Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for Graduation
Undergraduate History Program of University of Washington Tacoma

By

Eric Pham

University of Washington Tacoma

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Advisor: Dr. Julie Nicoletta

Abstract

This paper focuses on the third wave of Vietnamese migration to the United States, which occurred from the 1980s to the 1990s, and how this group of immigrants constructed their identity in a new country. From a Western perspective, particularly an American one, it is easy to categorize all Vietnamese immigrants under the same umbrella. Although there are similarities among all three waves, one significant element that differentiates the third wave from the other two is the United States' enactment of the Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1987, which facilitated an influx of Vietnamese Americans to the U.S. mainland. This allowed Vietnamese-Amerasian children, whose fathers were U.S. servicemen, to migrate to the United States years after the end of the Vietnam War. Thus, this wave is unique compared to the previous two. In arriving almost twenty years after the war and under specific guidelines, the third-wave immigrants constructed a hybrid identity that was negotiated between being Vietnamese and American through various mediums. Primary sources, such as personal interviews of third-wave Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Amerasians, help define the distinct identity of third-wave Vietnamese immigrants. This project argues that the third wave had economic, cultural, generational differences and similarities compared to the first and second waves, because it consisted mainly of Vietnamese-Amerasians as opposed to the Vietnamese migrants of the earlier two waves. The examination of this wave in a historical context allows for the understanding of identity construction, as well as providing a snapshot of Vietnamese immigration history in the United States.

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Introduction

The Fall of Saigon on April 30th, 1975, marked the end of the Vietnam War, but this was just the beginning of a mass Vietnamese exodus that would span two decades and be categorized into three distinctive waves of migration to the United States by scholars and politicians alike. The first migration started shortly before the Fall of Saigon to evacuate Vietnamese who had been sympathetic to the U.S. Without American support, the fate of the South Vietnamese would have been sealed as their defeat was guaranteed. For the most part, this first wave of Vietnamese immigrants was educated, fluent in English, had profitable skills, and was mainly westernized.¹ The professions first-wave Vietnamese people held included teachers, doctors, and business owners. Others were military personnel, political leaders, and workers associated with the South Vietnamese government or the United States government. Although leaving one's homeland was not an easy task, the first wave fared better than the subsequent waves as the American government sponsored their evacuation and had boats, camps, and volunteer agencies that were all prepared for their arrival.²

The second wave of Vietnamese migration occurred in the late 1970s. The second wave, unlike the first wave, consisted of two distinct groups of people. The first was the ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam who were pressured to leave. The Chinese had monopolized the rice trade, and owned businesses, insurance agencies, banks, and transportation services, which the new communist government saw as an obstacle to its control.³ The other group was ethnic Vietnamese who escaped Vietnam in poorly crafted wooden boats, thus giving them the name

¹ Hien Duc Do, *The Vietnamese Americans* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 26.

² Nghia M. Vo, *The Vietnamese Boat People, 1954 and 1975-1992* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 82.

³ Vo, *Vietnamese Boat People*, 97.

“boat people.”⁴ Both groups in this wave were less educated than the first wave and consisted of the farming and merchant classes. Ethnic Chinese generally fared better than the Vietnamese. The Chinese generally escaped on cargo ships, which eliminated the perils of encountering pirates and rough seas that some of the ethnic Vietnamese faced.

The third wave, the area of focus for this paper, spans from the 1980s to the 1990s. This wave primarily consisted of Vietnamese-Amerasians, the third wave also included political detainees and ethnic Vietnamese who escaped in similar ways as the boat people did in the late 1970s. This wave consisted of a variety of people, but it was mainly Vietnamese-Amerasians. Amerasians are children who were fathered by U.S. soldiers with Vietnamese mothers and then left behind in Vietnam. The Amerasians in this group suffered discrimination in their homeland due to their mixed heritage, as they were reminders of the Vietnam War and more specifically the American presence. Along with the other two groups within this wave, they did not have any wealth to their name. Political detainees were poor as a result of their detainment and the other Vietnamese were already in a poor state because the government had taken everything from them by seizing property for consolidation under state control. Former business owners lost their shops overnight as private shops were discouraged or unable to make a profit. Third-wave immigration was facilitated in large part through the United Nations’ Orderly Departure Program, which was created to facilitate safer ways for Vietnamese immigrants to leave Vietnam in combination with the United States’ American Homecoming Act of 1987.

I argue that the Vietnamese third-wave migration was a distinctive wave from the first and second waves of Vietnamese migration because of the sociopolitical factors related to Amerasian identity and the limited educational and economic differences that made integration

⁴ Do, *Vietnamese Americans*, 28.

into the U.S society more difficult. Therefore, these social factors would negatively affect their identity development and prospects for upward mobility greater than the first and second waves, however there are multigenerational similarities that matters to the overall construction of Vietnamese identity in the United States.

Methodology

This paper utilizes oral history interviews that I conducted for this project in January and February 2020, as well as a textual analysis governmental reports and demographic data, to understand the ways that the third wave of Vietnamese immigrants created their identity. Two of the interviewees are my parents while the other two are Vietnamese community members I've known for some time. The variations in experiences amongst my interviewees were a tremendous help as each presented different contexts; most arrived during the third wave, but in different years. The interviews didn't follow a strict guideline; rather, I opted for more of a natural conversation and tried to let them lead the interview, but I did ask each interviewee basic questions which included "where are you from?" and "when did you migrate and why"? Government documents from the United State General Accounting Office and volunteer agencies, such as the United States Catholic Conference provided general data and statistics to help build a context for the stories of my interviewees.

My secondary sources included research books that were conducted on Vietnamese migration. These include dissertations specifically about the third wave and more general books about Vietnamese migration. Most of the secondary sources were tailored to specific genres and topics of Vietnamese identity. I must add that while the Vietnamese were classified as refugees, I will be using the term immigrants as their story is one of immigration. Also, my focus will be more so on the Amerasians in the third wave, even though boat people and political prisoners

were a part of the third wave as well. The combination of the experiences from third wave migrants, data, and research on niche subtopics such third-wave Vietnamese women education attainment, Vietnamese-Amerasians, and Vietnamese culture help demonstrate the distinctiveness of the third wave. Understanding the third wave of U.S. Vietnamese migration would not be possible without looking at the ways that these Vietnamese-Amerasians assimilated or attempted to assimilate into American culture. By analyzing personal histories and elements of popular culture, one can see how third-wave Vietnamese constructed their identity and navigated the difficulties of assimilating into a new society and how they expressed themselves during this period in American history.

Literature Review

Most immigration scholars agree that there are three significant waves of Vietnamese migration to the United States that occurred between the 1970s and 1990s. The scholarship on the third wave is by no means slim, but is underwhelming compared to studies on the first and second waves of Vietnamese immigrants. Nghia Vo's book, *The Vietnamese Boat People, 1954 and 1975-1992* (2006), helps situate the third wave in the context of the previous two waves. Vo explains the differences between each wave and the conditions that make these groups unique, so he argues that the third wave of Vietnamese immigrants is the least fortunate group compared to the first and second waves, in terms of occupation and their position in society.⁵ Although Vo provides some context for the third wave, he does not address the education and legal complexities that impacted this generation of Vietnamese-Amerasians.

Trin Yarborough covers this area of focus in her book, *Surviving Twice: Amerasian Children of the Vietnam War* (2005). Although the book is written in a novelistic-style and

⁵ Vo, *The Vietnamese Boat People*, 98-100.

focuses only on five Vietnamese-Amerasians, this small sample provides important historical background for conditions at home in Vietnam and later in the United States. This ethnographic approach allows for an examination of their construction of not only a Vietnamese identity, but an American one, as well. To explore these topics in more depth, Yarborough studies the U.S. resettlement program at Saint Anselm's Cross-Cultural Community Center in Orange County, California. She argues that the program was inadequate in providing support for the Vietnamese and especially for the Vietnamese-Amerasians who arrived under the American Homecoming Act of 1987 because of the limited benefits over a short length of time, if they were lucky enough to receive them. Yarborough's study finds that many Amerasians came with emotional trauma and physical problems that stemmed from being ostracized from traditional Vietnamese family unit which resettlement agencies were unable to address adequately.⁶ The focus on the Amerasians of the third-wave groups puts them as a separate identity from ethnic Vietnamese immigrants, which illustrates the complexities within this wave and that their Asian identity is not as homogenous as commonly perceived, even though all three waves expressed pride in their culture.

Expanding the scholarship on the third-wave Vietnamese even further, Hoa Truong's dissertation, "Vietnamese Young Women from the Third Wave of Immigration: Their Struggle for Higher Education," takes a direct look at third-wave women and their college education attainment. Truong argues that there are significant studies on the hardships that Vietnamese refugees encounter, but the research on Vietnamese women is limited.⁷ Truong interviewed a

⁶ Trin Yarborough, *Surviving Twice: Amerasian Children of the Vietnam War* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), xi-xii.

⁷ Hoa T. Truong, "Vietnamese Young Women from the Third Wave of Immigration: Their Struggle for Higher Education" (EdD diss., University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2001), vi. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

small group of third-wave Vietnamese women and their education goals. Overall, the group of women all expressed their beliefs that English is a skill that they need to be able to progress in America. Although Truong's sample is small, it consists of a variety of Vietnamese that highlights the diversity of people within the third wave, such as ethnic Vietnamese, Amerasians, and daughters of political detainees. The focus of Truong's research is to "fill gaps in the current research literature pertinent to second language learning of young Vietnamese women refugees," yet acknowledges this could potentially "open new windows" in the ways Vietnamese women construct their identities.⁸ These new windows include challenging the Vietnamese traditions where females should be dedicated to domestic duties at home rather than working. An important take away from Truong's study is that it shows how Vietnamese women navigate their lives in the U.S challenging cultural and social contexts.

Nhi Lieu's book, *The American Dream*, argues that construction of Vietnamese American identity is evident through the entertainment industry as it allows for Vietnamese to transcend their status as refugees and forge new identities through their music, ballads, and shows.⁹ Lieu's interpretation is essential to the scholarship of Vietnamese Americans as it helps to understand not only who the Vietnamese people are, but shows that Vietnamese American identities are not static and the Vietnamese in America are not importing a set of characteristics and predetermined culture and customs. They are continuously negotiating their own identities. This allows for a cultural analysis of the Vietnamese American through the lens of popular culture to understand the ways Vietnamese Americans create these identities.

⁸ Truong, "Vietnamese Young Women from the Third Wave," 5.

⁹ Nhi T. Lieu, *The American Dream* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xviii, xx.

Popular media assumes that the success of Vietnamese refugees is because of their values, “The values they came with—a dedication to family, education and thrift.”¹⁰ On the contrary, some scholars, including Nazli Kibria, oppose this interpretation. Kibria’s book, *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans*, argues that traditional Vietnamese family ideologies are challenged by living in America and they have changed due to the cultural differences and circumstances that Vietnamese Americans face in the United States compared to back in Vietnam.¹¹ The reliance on Vietnamese women’s income challenges the traditional Vietnamese family system where men are the main contributors to family income. This shift in the power balance of gender relations prompts Vietnamese women to hold more power than in Vietnam. Children are becoming more “American,” which went against parents’ teachings as Vietnamese culture is more conservative than American culture.

The scholarship on the third wave of Vietnamese migration exists, but it is thin and mostly focuses on specific subtopics of the larger Vietnamese migration experience. Even though the scholars themselves are experts within their field and have made tremendous strides toward making this wave more visible, they suffer from a narrow focus. This paper aims to contribute to the research by consolidating the scholarship and creating a complex yet comprehensive analysis of which to view third-wave Vietnamese migrants.

Historical Background

¹⁰ Ellen Hume, “Vietnam’s Legacy: Indochinese Refugees Adapt Quickly in U.S., using Survival Skills some Early Arrivals make it in Entrepreneurial Jobs; Values that Spell Success Work, School, Thrift, Family Vietnam’s Legacy: Indochinese Refugees Prosper in U.S., Drawing on Survival Skills, Specials Values,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 21, 1985, ProQuest.

¹¹ Nazli Kibria, *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 7-10.

The United States' involvement in Vietnam dates to French colonial rule of Vietnam in the 1950s, but this paper features its more "direct" involvement in Vietnam beginning with the Vietnam War (1954-1975). Years before major conflict broke out, in the 1950s the United States was working behind the scenes either funding French rule or sending its own advisors to ensure communism did not prevail in Southeast Asia.¹² Under President John F. Kennedy's leadership, the United States increased the amount of military advisors in Vietnam and even sent troops; by the time he was assassinated, American troops numbered 16,000 compared to a few hundred the preceding year.¹³

War seemed inevitable as the number of troops increased. On August 2nd, 1964, North Vietnamese torpedo boats supposedly attacked American ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. This incident led Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States to prevent further aggression."¹⁴ This resolution gave President Lyndon B. Johnson power to escalate military action in Vietnam. President Johnson approved a series of bombardments of North Vietnam in 1964. Although these air raids proved to be destructive, these bombings largely failed in that Johnson was forced to send the first American troops to Vietnam in 1965. American troops numbered 200,000 in 1965 and by 1967 stood at half a million.¹⁵

The Vietnam War became a drag on Americans abroad and at home. Due to the conscription or draft for soldiers, Americans disliked the fact they were going to be fighting in a

¹² Sucheng Chan, *The Vietnamese 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolutions, Flight, and New Beginnings* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006), 45-49.

¹³ Do, *The Vietnamese Americans*, 21.

¹⁴ Do, *The Vietnamese Americans*, 22.

¹⁵ Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation*, 52.

country that was so far away and different than before. Once there it wasn't a conventional war as they fought in dense jungles and against an enemy that specialized in hit-and run tactics or guerilla warfare. This became a drag on soldiers' morale as they didn't know when and where the enemy would strike. At home, amid the Civil Rights Movement, anti-war protest grew among American students, professionals, and eventually Vietnam veterans.¹⁶ Soldiers who were drafted were generally poor or from working-classes families while richer families were able to improvise ways to keep their sons out of the military or at least direct them out of Vietnam. Plus, moral arguments were also made about brutality in Vietnam, citing examples such as the public execution of a Viet Cong soldier in the street of Saigon by General Nguyen Ngoc Loan and the United States' motives appeared imperialistic.¹⁷

The Tet Offensive in 1968 showed how cunning and committed the North Vietnamese forces were in defeating the South Vietnamese and the United States troops. They were able to sneak forces and weapons into South Vietnam. The Viet Cong violated their cease-fire agreement and were able to take cities held by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). They even captured the U.S. Embassy in Saigon temporarily. This offensive shocked Americans at home, because media portrayal of the war had focused on the battlefields. When the embassy was captured it showed how vulnerable the ARVN and Americans troops really were,¹⁸ even though the Viet Cong were beaten back and suffered significant losses totaling 45,000 casualties with 32,000 of that number amounting to deaths out of 48,000 total troops.¹⁹ The Tet Offensive

¹⁶ Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation*, 51.

¹⁷ Allen, Guttman, "Protest against the War in Vietnam," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 382 (March 1969): 61-63. www.jstor.org/stable/1037114.

¹⁸ Do, *The Vietnamese Americans*, 23.

¹⁹ Chan, *The Vietnamese Americans 1.5 Generation*, 52.

would mark the beginning of the end for the United States in Vietnam. With Richard Nixon replacing Johnson as president and the American people subjected to the realities and horrors of the Vietnam War, it was time for the United States to exit Vietnam “with honor.”²⁰

As stated before, the first wave of Vietnamese migration started in April 1975 after the Fall of Saigon, yet there were already evacuations of Vietnamese to the south in March of that year. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) supplied its troops from the north to the south due to their improvements in infrastructure, which resulted in access to supplies in three weeks rather than two months.²¹ This enabled the NVA to engage in the Great Offensive of 1975, which led to the end for South Vietnam. Without American support and poor leadership, the ARVN was stretched thin and continuously lost battles. Of the Convoy of Tears migration, which consisted of 400,000 civilians and 60,000 South Vietnamese marines, only 100,000 civilians and 20,000 marines survived the assault from the NVA and made it to the coastline.²² The ones that did survive were scarred with memories of their loved ones being brutally murdered by the NVA. Civilians were not spared, including women and children.

Other pre-Saigon evacuations and migrations included sealifts from ARVN-held coastal cities such as Da Nang. Airplanes were originally sent in, but with the NVA encroaching on the ARVN, many refugees became hostile. Thus, airlifts were canceled, and U.S. General Homer Smith sent any boats he could procure to evacuate the refugees.²³ The final evacuation before the main one in April 1975 was called Operation Babylift as many orphans were adopted and

²⁰ Chan, *The Vietnamese Americans 1.5 Generation*, 53.

²¹ Vo, *The Vietnamese Boat People*, 55-56.

²² Vo, *The Vietnamese Boat People*, 56-57.

²³ Vo, *The Vietnamese Boat People*, 58.

airlifted out of the country. Historian Nghia Vo would call these evacuations of South Vietnamese soldiers and families “rehearsals for the real thing to come.”²⁴

These early evacuations would become synonymous with the 1975 migration wave as the Fall of Saigon forced Americans to hastily evacuate any remaining Americans and at-risk Vietnamese.²⁵ From April 21 to 29, 35,000 Vietnamese were evacuated by fixed wing planes. Under bombardment from the NVA, the United States had to resort to helicopter evacuations as it was too dangerous for planes to land at the airport under fire. U.S. pilots worked tirelessly from April 29th to the early morning of April 30th to ensure that they could rescue as many Vietnamese refugees as possible.²⁶ The first-wave refugees had connections to Americans in some sort of way. They were either professionals, girlfriends and wives to soldiers, or former ARVN military personnel. The refugees were settled in four camps at Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Eglin Air Force base in Florida and Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania that the United States had prepared for their arrival. Volunteer agencies did a tremendous job helping the refugees resettle; by December 1975, all the first-wave refugees had left the camps and been resettled.²⁷ In other words, the resettlement experience of refugees in the United States went smoothly compared to their exit from Vietnam. The refugees were fortunate to have programs and the funding to adequately help them adjust to their new lives in the United States.

²⁴ Vo, *The Vietnamese Boat People*, 63.

²⁵ Chan, *The Vietnamese Americans 1.5 Generation*, 61-62.

²⁶ Chan, *The Vietnamese Americans 1.5 Generation*, 61-64.

²⁷ Vo, *The Vietnamese Boat People*, 81

The second wave of Vietnamese immigration occurred in the late 1970s. Generally, around 1977, this wave consisted of ethnic Chinese Vietnamese and Vietnamese looking for ways to get out of the country while the communist regime was undergoing tumultuous changes to achieve its goal of centralization. Due to being targeted for their wealth the Chinese Vietnamese left through land routes to China before they were closed or by sea on cargo ships. Wealth, also, provided opportunities for corrupt officials as they would help facilitate the movement of people. This ranged from the creation of fake documentation to creating makeshift camps near the coast, before they would board freight ships.²⁸

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and host countries became aware about these illegal departures and cracked down. Legal departures now went through the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) in 1979. This meant close family members with relatives in the United States, former employees of the United States and anyone else closely identified with the United States.²⁹ Other concessions of the ODP made sure that asylum countries pledged to increase the numbers of refugees that they would take in. Many other series of acts would be promulgated in this era such as the Refugee Act of 1980. This redefined what a refugee is; thus, this act benefitted Vietnamese refugees.³⁰ Plus, the Amerasian Immigration Act of 1982 was the first act that targeted Vietnamese-Amerasians, as long as their U.S fathers claimed them. Even with the ODP and other reforms, many Vietnamese still left illegally, as many didn't have the money to board these safer cargo or freight ships. Instead they used makeshift boats generally made from poor quality materials such as wood. These people gained

²⁸ Chan, *The Vietnamese Americans 1.5 Generation*, 79-80.

²⁹ Chan, *The Vietnamese Americans 1.5 Generation*, 81.

³⁰ Chan, *The Vietnamese Americans 1.5 Generation*, 83.

the label “boat people” because of their ships and dangerous travel. Many of the Vietnamese boat people would suffer pirate attacks or perish at sea due to the quality of their boats. These dangerous journeys would continue into the late 1980s.

Although migration continued, the third wave from the 1980s to 1990s, became distinct due to the influx of Amerasian Vietnamese who were now coming of age and attempting to escape Vietnam. This wave had less wealth, education, and connections to Americans than the previous two waves did; therefore, they fared worse than the other two. The ODP did include Amerasians as a group eligible for migration, but it was the Amerasian Immigration Act of 1982 that specifically targeted them as well as the eventual Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1987. The latter act eliminated some restrictions originally imposed in the 1982 version, such as prohibiting mothers and siblings of Amerasians, while mothers of minor Amerasians had to sign an irreversible release for them.³¹ As a result of the 1987 act, the United States created the Amerasian Transit Center in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly known as Saigon, to help facilitate the departure of Amerasians. Unlike the previous waves, Vietnamese-Amerasians experienced discrimination in Vietnam both from the government and other Vietnamese. They were labeled as children of the enemy. In addition to being abandoned by their U.S fathers, for some, their own mothers would abandon them as well.³²

All three waves of migration were fortunate due to the Immigration Act of 1965 as it eliminated quotas on all immigrants. Previously, Europeans generally had larger quotas while Asian countries had extremely small quotas. This act would be the precursor to all the later

³¹ The United States Catholic Conference Migration and Refugee Services, *In Our Fathers' Land: Vietnamese Amerasians in the United States* (Washington, DC: The United States Catholic Conference, 1985), 2.

³² Chan, *The Vietnamese Americans 1.5 Generation*, 93.

immigration acts mentioned previously, as it effectively allowed Asian migration to the U.S. after decades of institutional discrimination such as restrictive immigration and naturalization.

Oral Histories of Vietnamese Immigrants

My four interviewees are representatives of the third wave except one. Thi Gai was an exception as she began her journey at the end of the second wave; just a bit too early for the third wave. Truong Lee, Nga Tran, and Hai Pham all arrived during the third wave and each represents different aspects of the third wave. I personally interviewed them to consolidate a third-wave identity. Below are some of their recollections of their journeys to America and at times perilous, attempts to have a semblance of a life in America, and their experiences.

Thi “Ba Tam” Gai³³

Thi Gai was born in 1955. Nicknamed Ba Tam, she recounts her life in Vietnam as hard. She lived in central Vietnam closer to the northern boundaries. Her life was influenced by the northern communist regime. Everything was controlled by the northern government. If you resisted, then you faced the possibility of death. Ba Tam tells tales of people being buried alive. She says this was due to people openly resisting the Viet Cong. Interestingly, this story of hers reminded me of the Hue Massacre where the Viet Cong killed many non-combatants including women and children. Some were even buried alive. Regardless, her stories recall the brutality of the Tet Offensive when the North Vietnamese forces relentlessly attacked the ARVN and killed women and children. In 1981, she decided that it was time to leave Vietnam. She left in her early thirties with her husband and children. Like other boat people during the second wave, the journey was perilous, rough, and the possibilities of danger were certain, but the risk was worth it compared to living in Vietnam. Ba Tam recounts the journey:

³³ Thi Ba Tam Gai, Interview by Eric Pham, Olympia, Washington, February 1, 2020.

“March 1981. We took a boat for four days and were caught by Thai pirates. They held us for the night and assaulted younger people or ones without children. They took our jewelry and everything else they could find on the boat. We didn’t have nothing. We each had 1 or 2 sets of clothing for each of us. We didn’t know if we were going to survive or die on the journey. The girls were raped. They gave us rice porridge and water. They held us from 5pm to 10am the next day. They gave us back our maps and we continued the journey towards Malaysia.”³⁴

Ba Tam and her family were able to make it to Malaysia and stayed there for eleven months before being sent to the Philippines Refugee Processing Center (PRPC) at Bataan. Ba Tam took English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes there for a few months, but she jokingly said, “I left my English back in the Philippines.”³⁵ She was sent to the United States after her time in the PRPC. She states that her original intended destination was Australia as she heard rumors that land was available, but because she did not have relatives in Australia, she wasn’t accepted. After arriving in the United States, Ba Tam lived in areas with established Vietnamese enclaves, such as San Diego and San Jose, but did not stay for long as her family moved around following whatever employment presented itself. She stayed home and took care of the children while her husband was able to purchase a boat and resort to fishing off the coast of California. Another reason for relocating around in the United States was her children.

Ba Tam was afraid her children would be influenced by the street life as they lived in poor areas. She was afraid that her kids would fall prey to gangs and tension among other ethnic and racial groups, such as Mexicans and Blacks. She went to Massachusetts, then finally settled in Olympia, Washington, in 2001. She wanted her children to know the Vietnamese language as well as some traditional values, stressing social/familial hierarchy as an example. She mentioned that most of her grandkids cannot speak Vietnamese, which is not a problem for her anymore.

³⁴ Gai.

³⁵ Gai.

She did not elaborate why it's not a problem, but what I speculate is that acclimation and adjustment to another culture is inevitable especially when you're permanently located there. Perhaps she saw this in her own children and realize that the same will happen with their children. Today, Ba Tam lives with her son who mainly takes care of her though she does find odd jobs such as babysitting or providing her cooking services to other Vietnamese families. Unfortunately, her husband passed away a few years ago, but they had been divorced for some time. That was a topic I did not dare ask.

Truong "Johnny" Lee³⁶

Johnny was born in 1978. Johnny came to the United States in 1986 at the age of seven. His life in Vietnam was a blur as he was too young to remember his childhood there. He says that his family migrated to America under normal conditions. Johnny's uncle migrated as a boat person. He told me that his uncle had almost died on the journey to America while another uncle was sent to a reeducation camp. He already had family in the United States before arrival, so his family might have migrated through programs such as the Orderly Departure Program that allowed for family reunification.³⁷ This was different from the American Homecoming Act as it was broader, but at the same time more selective. In other words, Johnny may have come during the third wave, but he is not an Amerasian. His family originally settled in Seattle, Washington before moving to the Olympia/Lacey area to start a Vietnamese market although selling the market to another Vietnamese family later. Today, the market is well-known in the local region. His parents worked in a Vietnamese restaurant as cooks and waitress/waiters while he and his

³⁶ Truong Johnny Lee, interview by Eric Pham, Olympia, Washington, February 1, 2020.

³⁷ Do, *The Vietnamese Americans*, 35.

siblings enrolled in school. His parents started as service workers, eventually owning a small Vietnamese grocery store, then later a restaurant.

Truong became known as Johnny as it was hard for people to pronounce his name. Johnny was able to achieve citizenship through his parents around the age of 10. When asked if he felt Vietnamese or American or both, Johnny stated “that it was half and half. When you are at home with your family, it’s more like Vietnamese culture, but when you are outside with your friends or at work, you’re more like an American.”³⁸ He did not have any friends for the year that he stayed in Seattle with his family. He attributes it to his poor English skills at the time. He states one reason for his family’s move to Olympia was due to the possibility of violence towards his family. Whether it was targeted or not was unknown, but a rock was thrown through their window and they felt unsafe living there. School was pressed upon Johnny as extremely important through his parents. Although Johnny didn’t graduate from high school, he expresses that school is extremely important as he has his own son now. Johnny did not have many Vietnamese friends when he was younger. While living in Olympia, he hung out with Cambodian gangsters, because they were helpful to him and showed kindness. Yet, now he sees them as a factor for not graduating, as hanging out with them took up most of his time and, if he didn’t go with them when requested, they ostracized him. Today, Johnny works at Hardell Mutual Plywood Corporation. It’s an assembly-line style job, but it has provided economic security in his life. He is also a small shareholder in the company, so he has not only physically invested in the work itself, but economically and he reinvests into his place of occupation.

Nga “Mom” Thi Tran³⁹

³⁸ Lee.

³⁹ Nga Thi Tran, interviewed by Eric Pham, Olympia, Washington, January 31, 2020.

Nga was born in 1968 in the countryside near Quang Ngai Province and grew up there. Her mother was Dung Tran and her father was an American soldier who Nga would never meet. Her childhood from the start was rough due to her being an Amerasian. She was almost put up for adoption as her Vietnamese grandfather wanted that. Amerasians were a problem and viewed as reminders of the enemy of the Vietnamese. Having an Amerasian granddaughter was an embarrassment. It showed that the mother was a single mother who was ostracized in Vietnamese culture because of having a child outside a traditional family unit as the child is a reflection of the family or, in this case, the mother.⁴⁰ After Nga's birth she was prepared to be given away, but her mother could not follow through with it and kept her. Her grandfather forced her mother to keep Nga away from the house, so she was placed in a treehouse near the house for the first few months of her life until Nga's older half-brother who was associated with the United States Army threatened their grandfather. Nga first went to school at the age of 6, but dropped out around the age of 10 due to the discrimination she faced because she was a Vietnamese-Amerasian. She said,

“Other classmates would tease me every day for being mixed. I ignored the hair pulling, the physical hits, and name-calling for so long until they started to form groups. I would get into a fight every day. I'm not kidding! I was so fed up with being teased daily that I dropped out of school. Every day parents of the children would follow me home complaining to grandma. No adults would believe me that they started the fights first. They used to call me USA. When I went to watch movies, they would pull my hair.”⁴¹

After dropping out of school she moved to Saigon to live with her aunt. She took care of her younger cousin while her aunt went to work. She and her aunt were approached by a family that wanted to purchase her because she was Amerasian, because many Vietnamese people were

⁴⁰ Truong, “Vietnamese Young Women from the Third Wave,” 86.

⁴¹ Tran.

shopping for Amerasians for a way out of Vietnam. This was relatively easy and not a rare occurrence as most parents of mixed children destroyed all documents, pictures, letters and anything else that connected to their American husbands or lovers.⁴² Nga considered it herself and told her aunt that she wanted to be sold as it would provide her mother with money, but her aunt refused because her mother would kill her, and the money wouldn't last long. She didn't see any other Amerasians when she was in Saigon because she lived in a small neighborhood that didn't have a large population of Amerasians. She moved back to Quang Ngai province when she was 15. She returned to Saigon, in 1990, after hearing that the United States was allowing the migration of Amerasians. She lived in the Amerasian Transit Center in Saigon for about a month to determine her status as an Amerasian. This was where she first met many Amerasians and learned how they lived in Saigon, because Nga was from central Vietnam in a more rural area isolated from a bigger Amerasian population. The term Bui Doi translated means "dust of life," but it also means homeless. This was how Amerasians were viewed and how they lived prior to the enactment of policies that allowed for their migration. By this time, Nga was already married to Hai Pham (another interviewee in this paper) for about two years and had a one-year-old boy. Nga was able to secure her paperwork, which allowed her husband and one-year-old baby to join her. Her grandma would have to come at another time, however, as officials told her that only immediate family members were allowed. She said that, "if my mother wasn't allowed to go then I'm not going."⁴³ She was told that living in Vietnam as an Amerasian wasn't good for her, so she needed to go and that the paperwork could be filed to bring her mother to the U.S. later.

⁴² Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation*, 94.

⁴³ Nga Thi Tran.

Nga, her husband, and their son were transferred to the PRPC where they would spend the next six months in preparation to move to the U.S. She studied ESL there and was given a certificate as proof of accomplishment. A normal day in the center went as follows: wake-up, go to school, and then head back home. Rations were given out to each family and if you had a child or children, the center provided powdered milk. Since Nga didn't have any established family in the United States, volunteer agencies, specifically the United States Catholic Conference, helped to migrate her to America. In late 1990 to early 1991, She and her family arrived in Seattle and met a family that sponsored her for two weeks. Soon, though, Nga wanted to move to Olympia, because her neighborhood was "all rich and mainly white families. Plus, it was boring."⁴⁴ In Olympia she was around more Vietnamese people, including other Amerasians. In Olympia, she stayed with another white woman, named Fern, who helped other Amerasians in Olympia. Fern's husband would later divorce her because of her passion for helping Amerasians. Nga attended ESL courses at the local community college, but dropped out due to the stress of having two newborns and the fact that she was put into a class above her skills. She said,

"My English skills were better verbally than written skills because when they tested me in the Philippines it was an oral/verbal examination, not a written one. I wasn't allowed to go to a lower level when I asked. I was in a classroom filled with old Vietnamese men who were political detainees, ones that had ties to the United States and returned from re-education camps. These guys had really good English skills."⁴⁵

The jobs she has held since her arrival in the U.S. include janitorial, assembly line, restaurant, caretaker, and nail technician positions. She feels like she is a Vietnamese person, but she knows she is mixed, meaning her mixed heritage will always be a part of her identity, even

⁴⁴ Nga Thi Tran.

⁴⁵ Nga Thi Tran.

though, culturally, she grew up Vietnamese. During her years in America, many people, including both white Americans and Vietnamese, have mistaken her as a white American. When she worked as a nail technician, a customer was surprised to find an American who knew how to do nails. When she worked as a caretaker, one of her patients was a Vietnamese woman who did not know she was Vietnamese when they first met. The Vietnamese woman complained to her supervisor that she wanted a Vietnamese worker until Nga spoke up and told her that she was Vietnamese. Even though she feels like a Vietnamese, she believes that her attitudes are more aligned with American ones because she's more rebellious than typical Vietnamese who are more conservative.

Hai Van "Dad" Pham⁴⁶

Hai Pham was born in 1966. His father died shortly after his birth and he would be raised by his mother and grandparents. Hai Pham also grew up in Quang Ngai as an only child. His father died fighting for the ARVN. He was a normal child by any standard. He was adventurous and swam in nearby rivers and creeks. He started school at the age of 5 and ended school at the age of 14 because it was getting too expensive for his family to pay for school. After school he worked as a mason, making bricks and selling them to people who used them to build houses. He would become a carpenter, too, building all sorts of furniture. He first met his future wife, Nga Tran, in 1984, in Quang Ngai, but they wouldn't start a relationship until 1987 or 1988. He was familiar with the plight of Amerasians and knew that the government discriminated against them. His own grandpa did not approve of his relationship with Nga, while his mother did not care. He wasn't familiar with Amerasians as many of them lived in urban areas such as Saigon. After marrying Nga, he was able to obtain paperwork through her and went to the PRPC with their

⁴⁶ Hai Van Pham, interview by Eric Pham, Olympia, Washington, January 31, 2020.

baby boy. Like Nga, he studied English there and learned a little bit about American culture, such as going to garage sales on Saturdays.

His arrival in America was assisted through the United States Catholic Conference. He stayed at the home of his sponsor, Mark Stuart, for a week or two until his wife wanted to move down to Olympia, because they learned there was a bigger population of Vietnamese. In Olympia, he worked in janitorial, construction, and restaurant jobs, eventually settling into a job as a casino dealer. He attended English classes for two years at South Puget Sound Community College, but was unable to finish because he needed to work to survive and support his family. He has enjoyed life in America, saying, “I like American culture. I listened to The Flamingos and rock music. I like both American and Vietnamese culture.”⁴⁷ Yet, he also mentioned that when he first arrived in America, he was very stressed.

“I was very stressed when I first came to America. Everything was stressful. We didn’t know anything. Jobs and anything you did. You wanted to go somewhere and anywhere, I had to take the map from the bus station and map from the telephone book. Every night I studied where we lived, how to get to places and get back. I learned the bus routes, how to go to shopping centers, and laundromats.”⁴⁸

He said the bad times were when his English skills were new. When his English became more proficient, then he labeled those times as good times. He considers himself now as a Vietnamese American and different from Vietnamese people from the homeland because of his exposure and acclimation to American culture.

Analysis

⁴⁷ Pham.

⁴⁸ Pham.

Based on the interviews, the third-wave Vietnamese seemed to have a distinct identity however despite the conditions of their later arrival than the previous waves, there was a strong urge to retain cultural and traditional values amongst the third wave and even the need to pass them onto their children. Even if culture and tradition were constant in the third wave, the third wave wasn't afforded the same luxuries that the first and second waves received due to America's need to put the war behind them. The United States positively positions itself, in opposition to Britain, who allotted only two Vietnamese refugees in 1987.⁴⁹ The efforts of the United States are undeniable, but legislative changes during the third wave suggest it was winding down or rather becoming fatigued. The Comprehensive Plan of 1989 set a concrete date to "end" the crisis while shortening the welfare assistance for Vietnamese immigrants. Thus, these profound differences would impact their education and employment opportunities.

Multigenerational Similarities

The interviews suggest that there is a strong urge to maintain traditional and cultural Vietnamese values among the second and third waves. Ba Tam from the second wave as well as all three third-wave participants mentioned some values that resonate within the Vietnamese culture still, such as social relations and ethics and practices that derive from Confucian teachings.⁵⁰ So, it is not surprising to find that these ideas were prevalent in the third wave as much as the previous two. One is the idea of filial piety, where children give their respect, love, and care to their parents or elders.⁵¹ For instance, when Nga Tran was told that her mother would not be able to accompany her to the Philippines, she said she wasn't going until her mother was

⁴⁹ "Boat People and Compassion Fatigue," *New York Times*, editorial, July 14, 1988.

⁵⁰ Do, *The Vietnamese Americans*, 6-7.

⁵¹ Do, *The Vietnamese Americans*, 9.

able to join her. The service worker explained to Nga that her mother would be able to migrate after she and her family went first. Fortunately, Nga's mother did make it to the United States albeit a few years after Nga's arrival. This was in part due to financial reasons, paperwork, and her grandmother's reluctance to move. Another example would be how Nga Tran's own grandfather didn't want her as a granddaughter due to her mixed heritage, yet as a young child she took care of him because he had suffered a stroke and was unable to care for himself. The willingness to sell herself to a family for a few pieces of jewelry, so her mother would be able to have some money, is perhaps the ultimate act of filial piety.

In the same light, Ba Tam wanted her children to learn traditional values and customs like filial piety, but more so for her children to understand and respect the social hierarchy within Vietnamese culture. Children are taught to say *chao* or say hi to their elders and slightly bow their head when doing so. Ba Tam notes that her mother tried to invoke notions of filial piety, so she wouldn't leave Vietnam in 1981, but she said, "How can I not leave? It was too hard to live in Vietnam. Anywhere else was better."⁵² Although I did not press her about how she felt to leave her mother behind, I can only imagine the toll it took on her to do so. Being Vietnamese myself, I am familiar with the filial piety of my own mother, Nga Tran, who took care of my grandma. Only two of eight of Ba Tam's siblings stayed in Vietnam. It's clear that Vietnamese traditional values and norms were brought and taught to their children and the next generation.

Generational Differences

From my findings, it is clear that Vietnamese culture remained strong and intact among Vietnamese from the third wave, so this section will focus on more of the legislation that influenced the third wave and societal impacts. Almost all legislation affecting the first and

⁵² Thi Gai.

second waves affected the third wave, too. This includes the ODP in 1979 to assist in orderly departure of refugees and the Refugee Act of 1980 which redefines what constituted a refugee, thus benefitting the Vietnamese boat people. Other legislation such as the Amerasian Immigration Act of 1982 and, its successor, the American Homecoming Act of 1987, were created to benefit Amerasians. These were the dominant factors in the third wave. In fact, by August 1993, 68,558 Vietnamese-Amerasians and their families were resettled in the United States.⁵³ The years 1991 and 1992 would be the highest years of Amerasian arrival, a period during which Nga and her family migrated.

Yet, by then society's mood began to change. The United States and other countries involved in the resettlement wanted to put an end to the refugee crisis once and for all. The Comprehensive Plan of Action in 1989 created cut-off dates for Vietnamese arriving past that point to be labeled as asylum seekers rather than having refugee status.⁵⁴ Although this legislation targeted the ongoing boat migration, it would affect the assistance the third wave would receive once in the United States. Starting in 1975, the U.S. began the reduction of the Refugee Cash Assistance program or welfare which was forty-eight months in 1975. By 1993, assistance for refugees' would be reduced to eight months; a significant decrease which would become a negative factor in the third wave's social and economic mobility.⁵⁵ This reduction would impact the third-wave immigrants' ability to spend enough time on education and English language attainment, thus significantly impacting their employment options.

⁵³ US General Accounting Office, *Vietnamese Amerasian Resettlement: Education, Employment, and Family Outcomes in the United States*, GAO/PEMD-94-15 (Washington, DC, 1994), 31

⁵⁴ Chan, *The Vietnamese Americans 1.5 Generations*, 86-87.

⁵⁵ Ruyet T. Ha, "Vietnamese Refugees 1975-2000: Factors and Reinforcements of Their Economic Self-Sufficiency" (DPA diss., University of La Verne, 2002), 93, 121.

Education

Based on my interviews, Hai and Nga received some education in Vietnam and in the United States. Johnny was the most fortunate one as he had migrated to the United States at a young age, so he was enrolled through the United States education system as a child. Even though he did not finish his senior year of high school, he still believes that education is a strong factor in social mobility. Hai and Nga, on the other hand, arrived in their early 20s with one child and another on the way. Nga had about four years of education in Vietnam, all at the primary education level. Her education was cut short due to her being Amerasian. Her experience correlates with the educational experiences of broader Amerasians in America. For instance, in Vietnam, 17 percent of Amerasians received 0-2 years of education, while 31 percent received 3-5 years.⁵⁶ Therefore, only 48 percent received up to a maximum of 5 years of school while a staggering 52 percent of their Vietnamese half-siblings received 6-8 years of education. In contrast, Hai's education history exceeds the average amount of education as he had nine years of schooling while he was in Vietnam.

Although my sample is small, within the context of education, Vietnamese fared better than their Amerasian counterparts in Vietnam. The mixed-race identity of Amerasians, like Nga, have hindered their education due to the discrimination they faced that put them at a disadvantage in Vietnam and eventually the United States. Nga was discriminated against when she was a child, which affected her ability to continue her education. In fact, 71 percent of Amerasians reported discrimination in Vietnam and discrimination occurred in the United States for younger Amerasians enrolled in the American school system.⁵⁷ Data from the General

⁵⁶ US General Accounting Office, *Vietnamese Amerasian Resettlement*, 11.

⁵⁷ US General Accounting Office, *Vietnamese Amerasian Resettlement*, 71.

Accounting Office shows that for Amerasians over the age of nineteen, 39 out of 100 enrolled in English courses once in the United States.⁵⁸ Hai and Nga would both enroll in an English as a Second Language (ESL) course in the United States, but both would drop out due to family and financial obligations as a result of reduction in federal and state government economic support such as the RCA. Hai and Nga couldn't improve their English because they had to drop out. English proficiency for new immigrants is associated with upward mobility and for many of the third-wave Vietnamese this wouldn't be possible due to the limited amount of assistance received from the government. This would entrap third-wave Vietnamese in "low skill, low wage" jobs that require little to no English. A study on Vietnamese women show that career choices depended on their English proficiency.⁵⁹ It takes years to reach a strong level of English proficiency that the third-wave immigrants were not afforded. Unlike previous waves who have used their skills and education to move upward, Nga and Hai are typical of third-wave immigrants who were not provided real access to education once in the U.S.

Ba Tam, on the other hand, did not have a formal education prior to her arrival in the United States. Yet, Johnny states he did not face any discrimination during his time in American schools, possibly because he migrated at a young age and his youth enabled him to learn English more easily than older immigrants. He did note that students had difficulty pronouncing his name, so he nicknamed himself Johnny. Therefore, his own choice in name changed demonstrates an acclimation or assimilation to American culture, ultimately his own identity in America.

⁵⁸ US General Accounting Office, *Vietnamese Amerasian Resettlement*, 40.

⁵⁹ Truong, "Vietnamese Young Women from the Third Wave," vii.

By 1990, Vietnamese education attainment in the U.S. for males 25 years and older was 68.5 percent for high school graduates or higher, while females were at 53.3 percent for the same level of education.⁶⁰ Overall, all interviewees expressed the importance of educational attainment either in their own endeavors, such as Johnny, Hai and Nga, or for their children in all four interviews, but it is clear that Nga, and Amerasians in general, received less education in Vietnam to prepare them for their time in America. Once in America, third-wave immigrants were unable to achieve the same level of education that previous waves did. In particular, the first wave benefitted as they had had more exposure to Americans in Vietnam. These differences would affect their employment options.

Employment

Employment in Vietnam prior to their arrival in the United States was virtually non-existent in my sample. Vietnam, in the 1980s, was in a tumultuous state at this point with the ongoing changes in their economy. Ba Tam and Nga both worked on their small family farms producing food to eat, not sell; in other words, they engaged in subsistence farming. Neither Ba Tam nor Nga worked for a wage, but each did agricultural work for their family. Hai was the only person to find employment in Vietnam where he worked for a wage. He was employed as a carpenter in Ho Chi Minh City, from 1988 to 1989, earning just enough to pay the rent and provide food for Nga and their newborn son as they awaited the decision from the Amerasian Transit Center whether they were able to migrate to America or not.

In America, three of the four people interviewed would engage in low-paying jobs, except for Johnny as he was young. Hai has worked in numerous occupations since his arrival in

⁶⁰ Edna L Paisano, et al., US Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census, *We, the Americans: Asians* (Washington, DC, 1993), 4.

America. He worked in custodial positions, in restaurants, construction jobs, and then finally settling as a casino dealer. Nga also worked in custodial positions, as well as factory or assembly-line jobs, as a nail technician, as a caretaker, and in restaurants. Typical Amerasian types of employment in the U.S. included assembly line work, housekeeping, hotel industry and other service-related work.⁶¹ Although Amerasians' lack of education did not hinder their ability to be employed in entry-level jobs, it did prohibit mobility as they didn't have the English skills to move up. Nga originally went to school when she first arrived in the U.S., but found work soon after as she needed to support her young family. Unlike Vietnamese refugees from the first and second waves who received eighteen to forty-eight months of refugee cash assistance, she received only eight months of assistance.⁶² Therefore, Nga had to abandon her dreams of education, because she needed to find employment once her refugee assistance ended. Further data from the General Accounting Office on Amerasians over the course of two years shows that employment rates were 24 percent in the first two months of being in the U.S. After two years in the U.S., employment rates for Amerasians rose to 69 percent, suggesting an acclimation to their life in America.⁶³ This survey was conducted at different intervals starting at two months and ending at two years.

Consequently, education is a direct factor in their occupations. For instance, Hai is still employed as a casino dealer and has not moved into any managerial position during his fifteen years as a dealer. Nga has worked in the Vietnamese restaurant business as a cook for the last ten years. Both jobs require little interaction with their customers besides Hai's occupation, but even

⁶¹ US General Accounting Office, *Vietnamese Amerasian Resettlement*, 55.

⁶² Ruyet, "Vietnamese Refugees 1975-2000", 93.

⁶³ US General Accounting Office, *Vietnamese Amerasian Resettlement*, 54.

then, it requires a minimum amount of English. Other factors include the type of occupation they had before arrival in America. First-wave immigrants and some second-wave immigrants had skills that were aligned with the United States' economic structure. They came with skills from their former occupations that made it easy to enter the United States labor force, as opposed to less-educated, third-wave immigrants.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Although circumstances that influenced their later arrival, in part, affected their identity, their mixed heritage also influenced the third-wave migrants' identity. Other Vietnamese had labeled them as *Bui doi* or "dust of life," rendering them as outcasts. Under this status, people who were *con lai* or Amerasians were discriminated against and ostracized in Vietnamese society, which would profoundly affect their identity and status in America. Thus, they formed a distinctive identity from other Vietnamese. This is evident in their educational experiences in Vietnam and how that, in turn, affected their educational attainment in America while simultaneously affecting their employment options. Even though Amerasians benefitted from legislation that prompted and hastened their migration, they suffered under more legislation that inhibited their chances in the U.S., such as reduction of social services. This third-wave identity would be one of lower socioeconomic status than that of the previous waves. Despite these differences that clearly highlight distinctiveness, Vietnamese traditional and cultural values were retained and passed down to the next generation. Personally, as a son of third-wave immigrants, I have embodied these ideals as I pursue my dream of higher education. I understand the importance of these traditions and cultural values, and it has influenced my decisions at times. My research establishes these differences, but an avenue for further research would investigate

⁶⁴ Do, *The Vietnamese Americans*, 83-84.

Vietnamese cultural and traditional resilience across generations and how that influences the next generation, such as myself.

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