

Between Two Cultures:
Struggles of Vietnamese American Adolescents

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Introduction

This research analyzes the second-generation Vietnamese Americans and their struggles with the “new” and “old” as they grow up in the United States. The Vietnamese American second generation is the largest population of refugee children in American history, the first of its community to be born or predominantly raised in American culture most of their childhood life.¹ With no prior generation in their ethnic group, they are the first to face the conflicts of growing up as Vietnamese and as Americans.

The Vietnamese American community is experiencing a rise of child rebellion juvenile delinquency through low high school performance and retention and the joining gangs. Many scholars attribute growing juvenile rebellion to bad neighborhoods. The research gathered here emphasizes the family. From seven open-ended interviews, the data indicates that the second generation just wants to be understood as they navigate between the pressures of Vietnamese and American cultures.

Vietnamese American History

For over twenty-five years, the Vietnamese American refugee community has called the United States of America its home. The Vietnamese refugees began flowing into the US after the fall of the South Vietnamese government in 1975. Classified as political refugees, political turmoil forced them to leave. The Vietnamese had little or no time or choice to prepare for their relocation into another country due to their fear of unfavorable fate.

This first wave of refugee immigration from 1975-1978, composed mostly upper middle-class urbanites. Many of these people had a professional occupation, higher

education, and some knowledge of English. Many were Roman Catholics originally from North Vietnam. They settled in South Vietnam after 1954 as refugees where they fled from the new North Vietnamese Communist government. Typically successful, these double refugees controlled much of the power and wealth of South Vietnam. The US Government helped most leave by ship or airplane in safely organized groups because many of them had relations in helping the US military.ⁱⁱ

The second-wave refugees, 1978-1979, were mostly ethnic Chinese. They experienced hostility within Vietnamese society for decades, this group became targets of the new Communist government. Primarily of middle-upper class backgrounds, these Chinese Vietnamese fled by fishing boats or bribed their way out of Vietnam.ⁱⁱⁱ

The third wave Vietnamese refugees, 1978-1983 commonly labeled as the “boat people,” were prominently rural farmers with no exposure to “western” culture. Fleeing in small fishing boats, they faced brutal conditions including murdering and raping Thai pirates, extreme hunger, and getting lost, wrecked and recaptured. The largest Vietnamese refugee wave, they have been the media’s center of interest.^{iv v}

With the first to third wave Vietnamese refugees into the US, the American government used four satellite refugee dispersion centers (military bases in California, Arkansas, Pennsylvania, and Florida) to cater and spread the incoming Vietnamese refugees across the entire nation because of fears that a large Vietnamese refugee community located in one location (most probable in the West Coast areas of the US) would offset the local economy. The American government carefully dispersed these Vietnamese refugees across the country to avoid undue concentration and to encourage assimilation into American culture.^{vi} The government also used nine voluntary agencies

(VOLAGS), some religious, to find sponsors for individual families and to promote adjustment to America.

Dispersion assured that Vietnamese Americans are to be found in almost every large metropolitan area in the US including areas that historically have not experienced any ethnic immigration at all. Ethnic enclaves developed through the migration of Vietnamese Americans for family reunification, communal reasons, and employment opportunities. The primary areas where early Vietnamese Americans migrated and settled were large metropolitan areas in California, Texas, Virginia, New York, and Florida, mostly of them with climates similar to Vietnam's. Over 56% live in California and Texas.^{vii} Thus "despite the government policies aimed at dispersion, geographically centered Vietnamese communities have been formed, drawing in growing numbers of compatriots through word of mouth and through extensive kinship and family networks."^{viii}

Currently, the Vietnamese American community is one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the US with an estimated population of over 1,100,000 people in 2000.^{ix} The Vietnamese Americans are the 4th largest Asian American community after the Filipino, Chinese, and Asian Indian Americans.^x

Almost all Vietnamese American refugees started off at the bottom in American society in the worst neighborhoods and in menial jobs. Yet a Vietnamese American middle-class has developed. These are much promise for success, but troubles have developed as well.

The Second Generation

The Vietnamese-American second generation has become “America’s single largest group of refugee children as they experience growing up American.”^{xi} Now heavily attending high school and college, Vietnamese American second generation feels especially conflicts between traditional Vietnamese values of their parents and the influences of growing up in American society. 96% of Vietnamese American children were born here or arrived before the age of 12.^{xii xiii}

The research conducted strives to analyze the tensions for second-generation Vietnamese Americans in the Washington, D.C. area to better understand juvenile rebellion among the Vietnamese American community.

Method

The analysis presented here is drawn from seven open-ended interviews with members of the second generations of the Vietnamese American community in the Washington, D.C. area (includes District of Columbia, Fairfax County of Virginia and Montgomery and Prince Georges Counties of Maryland), the fifth largest Vietnamese American community in the US.^{xiv} The research was limited to 14 to 23 years old Americans both of whose parents speak fluent Vietnamese and have Vietnamese backgrounds.^{xv} Five were college undergraduate students and two were high schoolers, five female and two male, 3 US born and 4 arriving before the age 12.^{xvi}

Earlier studies tied Vietnamese American youth rebellion to the bad influences of lower class neighborhoods and schools. This hypothesis is logical since many refugee children started out or still reside in lower-class areas.

Many scholars have also stressed differences between the children based on their family's class backgrounds in Vietnam.^{xvii} The first-wave Vietnamese knowledge of English is presumed to have helped their family's adjustment.

My research suggests complexities beyond neighborhood or prior class backgrounds. In the early 1900s, there was a study of European immigrant women, by Elizabeth Ewens, on how American institutions –the public school, the factory and the urban street – conspired to steal the children.^{xviii} It would seem that the same problems occur in the Vietnamese American community today. Yet the interviews suggest that problems of juvenile rebellion occur in upper-class good neighborhoods as well. .

However through this research, the interviewees proved that the acts of school drop-out, low academic achievement, and rebellion was not immune to the growing Vietnamese American middle to upper-class community that live in typical “nice” neighborhoods, disproving the hypothesis that the neighborhood as direct effect of the academic success of the children. As one female states:

Actually I noticed that the ones that don't struggle are commonly the ones that take the drugs and party the most. Their parents have all this money and they spoil them so much. Some go to schools like University of Virginia or John Hopkins and they use mad [a lot of] drugs and stuff like that.^{xix}

The interviewees of different classes, all argued that the neighborhood had no effect on their struggles with their families, though one suggested the actual difference of outcome of juvenile rebellion their economic situation:

In a bad neighborhood, parents are so busy trying to make money to get out of the neighborhood into a better one. Kids have better chance going to hang around with a lot of bad people from the area where gangs are more around. If a kid lives in a bad neighborhood and fall into a bad group of friends, they are likely to join a gang. In a good neighborhood, the kid more likely to drop out of school if they get involved with a bad

group of friends. They are likely to get into car racing. They are not really that serious with their future. They just want fun.^{xx}

Neighborhood and class seem less to create differences in tensions than differences in results when they occur.

Diverse class backgrounds of the Washington interviewees show similar dilemmas of rebellion tension, and poor educational performance across old and new class lines. No interviewee saw neighborhood as mattering so much as family in the conflicts. All agreed that parents and parental understanding were the main influences on youth rebellion.

Vietnamese Traditional Family Values

Many of the second-generation interviewees said that they knew little of Vietnamese traditional family values, but these were clearly close to the center of tension.

In Vietnam, the Vietnamese family is traditionally composed of 3-5 generations living in the same house.^{xxi} The typical Vietnamese family is highly valued as a support nucleus for its members. When a family member needs help, all in the unit contribute generously in aid. This form of support is also open to trusted friends.

In addition, the typical Vietnamese family works in a structure of authority and respect from Confucian ideology.^{xxii} The father, the authority figure of the family, makes all the important decisions. The mother is expected to take care of her husband, her parents-in-law and her children. The children are expected to obey and respect their parents without exception.

The Vietnamese regard highly education and literature. In traditional Vietnamese society, men of learning (Si) were at the top of the social scale.^{xxiii xxiv} A common Vietnamese proverb combines this dedication to education and to family support: “Mot nguoi lam Quan, ca ho duoc nho,” or “A mandarin can help all his relatives.”^{xxv}

Such family and educational values are central to nearly all Vietnamese regardless of class background. In Vietnam, the apparent focus of education is competitive throughout the whole country. Therefore, many areas of rural farming backgrounds also believe that a good education is important.^{xxvi}

Parents

In the interviews, parents were the major focus of criticism of these second-generation Vietnamese Americans. Lack of knowledge of their ethnic culture, parental strict behavior, and emotional support were stressed as core problems, while most urged greater understanding across the generational gap.

Vietnamese American refugee parents typically face a predicament. As refugees, they struggle to learn a new language, raise a family, earn a living in menial jobs, and learn new cultural rules and standards. “Many Vietnamese, particularly those who have come here since 1985, are struggling merely to survive.”^{xxvii}

For people who have lost their hopes and possessions, the situation is stressful. They strive, often in hard circumstances to educate their children for success, in part to their own old age. For example, Cuong Van, a seven year resident in Washington, D.C. said, “I only work to earn the money for them [his children]. But I enjoy. Maybe 10, 20 years more, they [his children] can help me.”^{xxviii} Many Vietnamese American parents

similarly use the education of the young as an investment that they make for the collective future for the family.

Vietnamese American children accept this expectation, especially those who have lived a significant time in Vietnam. This group better grasps Vietnamese American cultural standards and are willing to work harder than those of the second generation. These people also do not assimilate so wholly to American culture, partly because they have spent less time in public schools in the US.

While many second-generation Vietnamese Americans do well in school and obey their parents, they have more tendency to rebel, because they hear conflicting messages from school and American culture. First-generation Vietnamese American parents expect their children to know Vietnamese cultural values without being taught them. Hien Duc Do, author of *The Vietnamese Americans* wrote, “Children do not instinctually learn these cultural customs and practices simply because they are born into the family.”^{xxxix} Do argues that parents should actively teach their children about their culture, something all interviewees urge. One emphasizes:

If the parent keeps traditional values and the kid doesn't want to and the parents don't teach them what is good about it [Vietnamese traditional values], then of course the kid will go for what they think is right to do for them based on what they see in school. Then the parents keep on giving these expectations on the kid, which may push him over that edge.^{xxx}

Another explained:

Parents think that they are in Vietnam. They want me to feel the same way they do. But I don't understand what they feel because (1) they never tell me anything, (2) they expect me to be this obedient docile daughter, (3) they forget that I am American and was born here, and (4) they don't explain to me why they want me to do these things. Why do they expect me to understand what they mean?^{xxxi}

The teaching of Vietnamese cultural values and history matters to these children more than parents realize.

The interviewees also agreed that the typical Vietnamese American parent is too strict and over protective. They see that other American children do not experience such limitations on freedom, and assume that their parents are just old fashioned.

My parents were too strict and old fashioned. That is what I thought when I was in high school. None of my non-Vietnamese friends had as much of restrictions as me like calling my mom everywhere I went someplace and not be able to sleep over at someone's house. No matter how late it is, I have to be at home at night.^{xxxii}

These children's greater fluency in English encourage some role reversal and added responsibilities, because such youth can deal more effectively with institutions outside the Vietnamese American community.^{xxxiii} One college student remembers:

I felt like every single responsibility was put upon me in the family like taking care of stuff that had to deal with other people that were not Vietnamese. Such as how to buy a house, sign a contract, reading papers, settlements, car loans, all the paper work.^{xxxiv}

Such activities upset the hierarchical traditions of obedience of a Confucian Vietnamese family. A child with such responsibilities resent parents treating them as subordinates. Sometimes they decide that their parents do not care for them or are harshly unfair. The truth is that language makes it hard for many parents to do things that show children their love such as helping with school work or talking with school teachers.

Many Vietnamese parents also cloak their feelings with their children. Many of the interviewees voiced this problem. One male college student stated:

What I need is more words of encouragement and not things that would put me down like when my parents compare me to someone else. I hate

when they do that. What I need is comfort and love, which my family doesn't show much of.^{xxxv}

Parental criticism and nagging tends to worsen their misunderstanding.

According to Long, "A child struggling in the classroom and receiving nothing but criticism at home because of poor academic performance is likely to become truant."^{xxxvi}

An interviewee complained:

I get pretty decent grades in school. But my father always wanted me to do better. He looks at my report cards and yes, "These A(s) are good. How come you get a B. Must do better." It's like I can never please him.^{xxxvii}

High Vietnamese expectations about obedience and school success have created sharp generational conflict.

Such misunderstandings grow from cultural splits between people raised in Vietnam and those raised in the US. "'American' ways of dating, and individualism was with absolute obedience and family solidarity in mixed messages given by the society on one hand and those given at home."^{xxxviii} For example, a Vietnamese American child is taught at home not to talk back to an older person, and to avoid eye. Yet in the schools, the child is expected to speak up in class and to make eye contact with everyone addressed.^{xxxix}

The American standard opens the most common path for success in the larger society, but it alarms parents who try to dent individualism through Vietnamese traditions intended to "halt or slow down the pace of cultural assimilation."^{xl} The child resents such correction and thus rebels against "un-American" parents.

Many interviewees stressed parent's incomprehension of what their children are going through under the pressure both to achieve and to unquestionably obey. The conflicts makes many feel neither that their parents understand or love them.

One interviewee was typical:

When I was younger I used to think that my parents would be so strict on me because they didn't like me or even hated me. So I hated them. Especially my father. He was a real pain in the ass. But now that I'm in college and have a Vietnamese girlfriend, she actually taught me that it was a cultural thing and that I might probably be the same way when I'm a parent.^{xli}

Understanding on both sides is essential here. If children do not understand why parents worry and complain, they react with frustrated anger.

Environment and Social Circles

American schools provide one problem early in the history of the Vietnamese refugees, especially those who came with little education and no knowledge of English. The author Long writes, "Many children who were high achievers in Vietnam have failed here, and failure in school drives too many of these youngsters into gangs. Embarrassed, humiliated, lacking self-esteem and self confidence, students on the edge of families begin cutting classes."^{xlii} None of the interviewees had joined gangs, but several mentioned the struggle of "catching up" linguistically.

Good placement and remedial tutorial services were sometimes crucial.^{xliii}

An interviewee remembered:

I was placed in the 6th grade even though I did not know English. It was very hard and you know kids. They tease you because you are different. Kids would play tricks on you and you don't know who to go for help and all you can do is cry inside. I didn't want to go to school. It was like a punishment. It was the worst experience I ever had. I struggled a lot.^{xliv}

Most of the second-generation Vietnamese Americans, especially those born here, connected American schools with other problems. Almost all interviewees believed that more school mentors or teachers of Vietnamese American background might have created a bridge of understanding, but without this schooling, the influence of American standards and friendships conflicts with traditional Vietnamese parents. Friends provided much support:

The only people who helped me with school was my friends. They pushed me to do well and they cared how I did.^{xlv}

These friends were usually accepted by parents.

They [parents] didn't have any involvement with my choice of friends, but they knew all of them and would have said something if they didn't like any of them.^{xlvi}

Another interviewee explained:

I was a loner in high school and the friends I had were just normal students. More than me [laughs]. My parents didn't have much say as to any of my friends, but I kept with a good circle of friends that didn't go off the wrong track totally. I don't know why. Maybe it was an obligation to my parents to do well?^{xlvii}

Extracurricular activities also helped these young Vietnamese Americans. Many interviewees joined the local Vietnamese American boy and girl scouts, or urban Vietnamese American specific community centers, or played high school sports. They all felt that the friends that they made through these programs helped them use their time more wisely and stay out of trouble. One interviewee stressed her scouting experience as well as high school trends:

Scout trained me how to prepare for school and how to deal with it. My friends from high school helped me achieve success even though I already have help from scouts with leadership and training. But sometimes I slack off and it is my friends that force me and make me do my school work.^{xlviii}

A student praised his high school wrestling team experience:

In high school I was a part of the high school wrestling team and I think that this gave me some discipline and focus, which I brought into my school work. The coaches were always involved with our grades and they cared. Also if I didn't have wrestling, I would have just stayed home and would have nothing to do. Having a certain passion did make me work harder in the team and in school. And with my success I felt important and had some recognition.^{xlix}

Friends and extracurricular activities helped these Vietnamese American students achieve academic success and kept them in line in their academic careers, they also introduced them to cultural patterns at odds with those in their homes.

Freedom

Most interviewees saw their family tensions in terms of personal freedoms associate with US practices. Parents were strict, and their efforts to curb what seemed reasonable independence by American standards bred feelings of resentment. Le Thanh Viet, a leader and educator who works with Vietnamese American families emphasizes that parents, “should strive to understand and accept differences between the two cultures and then work at living in harmony with both.”¹

Parental failure to understand and discuss such realities fuel a cycle of rebellion. Kibria writes in *Family Tighrope* of Vietnamese American youth, “This desire for a more democratic communication pattern was coupled with complaints among the youth about the absence of open expressions of affection among Vietnamese family members, such as hugging and kissing, in contrast to the behaviors that they had observed in ‘American families.’”^{li}

One interviewee points out:

If you are in a rough situation parents can help handle it if they care and communicate with their kids. The parent must communicate with their kids and show that they worked hard to make money. They have to spend time and treasure their kids and not spoil them because the kid will not understand that spoiling them is their way of caring. No matter how rich, poor, or whatever, the kids will not be as bad because they will start to understand and talk.^{lii}

For the parents it is hard. Vietnamese traditional values lovingly cherish children, but assumptions of authority limit discussions and expressions of feeling. The child must accept whatever the parent tells them. Yet the emersion of American culture stresses other patterns which promotes family expectations. Children expect parents to be more American and parents expects their children to be more Vietnamese.

Children need to understand Vietnamese culture better, but the primary responsibility has to be the parents' grasp of the predicament of the child expected to live in two cultures.

A growing number of Vietnamese American first-generation parents are working to understand their children and what they are going through. And of course younger parents have an easier time:

Most people [Vietnamese Americans] who spend more than 10 years in the US will adapt. Especially those who came here after they were 12 years old or near that. My uncle is a parent and he's been around here [US] since he was 15 years old. The way he interacts with his child is different. You can see him speak English with his daughter and he will ask about what is going on with her in school and in her life.^{liii}

Things are changing, but often not fast enough to end generational angers. Yet the second-generation of Vietnamese Americans, for all their complaints and rebellions, also show love and respect for parents that holds their hope that they, like other

immigrants before them, may blend some of the strengths of the old and new cultures comfortably together in the families to come.

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ⁱ Min Zhou, *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States*, (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1998), 17.

ⁱⁱ Hung C. Thai, "Splitting Things in Halk is So White!," *Ameasia Journal* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center), 90.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thai, 90.

^{iv} Thai, 90.

- v There are also smaller waves such as the fourth and fifth wave refugees, 1983-1989 and post-1989, were asylum seekers mostly from refugee camps in countries such as the Philippines and Thailand, brought here by the US Government in aid of family reunification.
- vi Hien Duc Do, *The Vietnamese Americans*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press), 34.
- vii Zhou, 17.
- viii Zhou, 48.
- ix United States, Bureau of Census. *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 227th ed., Washington: GPO, 2000.
- x US Census 2000.
- xi Zhou, 1.
- xii Zhou, 4.
- xiii Of the Vietnamese American children, 79%, were born in the US or arrived prior the age of 5. Another 17% are members of the 1.5 generation of which includes those that arrived in the US between the ages of 5 and 12.
- xiv US Census 2000.
- xv The interviews were conducted in early December of 2001 and ranged in about a one-hour period. The average age was 18.
- xvi The process of finding these informants were through a student club of a local public university and a youth after-school program.
- xvii Based on the research of secondary resources, the argument of causes of Vietnamese American juvenile rebellion is directed towards Zhou, Kibria, and Long.
- xviii Nazli Kibria, *Family Tighrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 146.
- xix Interview #4, interview by author, 4 December 2001.
- xx Interview #5, interview by author, 10 December 2001.
- xxi Do, 10.
- xxii Do, 10.
- xxiii D.P.P Long and L. Ricard, *The Dream Shattered: Vietnamese Gangs in America*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press), 91.
- xxiv After the men of learning (Si) were farmers (Nong), skilled workers (Cong), and lastly businessmen (Thuong).
- xxv Do, 10.
- xxvi Zhou, 76.
- xxvii Long, 83.
- xxviii Mary Beth Sheridan, "Wall Street to Washington, Layoffs Shatter Lives," *Washington Post*, 31.
- xxix Do, 127.
- xxx Interview #5.
- xxxi Interview #4.
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- xxxv Interview #1, interview by author, 5 December 2001.
- xxxvi Long, 94.
- xxxvii Interview #3, interview by author, 14 December 2001.
- xxxviii Do, 74.
- xxxix Do, 74.
- xl Kibria, 146.
- xli Interview #7, interview by author, 4 December 2001.
- xlii Long, 95.
- xliii Schools are to blame because administrators place children with no thought to their English language proficiency.
- xliv Interview #6, interview by author, 14 December 2001.
- xlv Interview #7.
- xlvi Interview #4.
- xlvii Interview #1.

xlvi	Interview #5.
xlix	Interview #1.
l	Long, 80.
li	Kibria, 153.
lii	Interview #5.
liii	Interview #2.