

**Diversity and Diaspora: Vietnamese adopted as children
by Non Asian Families**

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Writer's Bio:

Indigo A. Williams was born in Saigon and placed in The Theosophical orphanage in Gia Dinh District in 1971. She arrived in Sydney, Australia to be adopted by Mr Cedric and Mrs Annette Williams, joining their family of two biological sons on December 23rd, 1972. She was one of the first children to be adopted from Vietnam to Australia.

Indigo Williams has a Bachelor of Arts in Communications from The University of Technology, Sydney. Her studies majors were Social & Political Theory specialising in SE Asian and International Studies, Orientalism : Colonial Constructs of the East and Power, Race & Ethnicity. She is also a published journalist and has worked for alternative news and current affairs radio programs and migrant women's community radio programs as a Researcher and Presenter. Her story was featured in the book "Minefields and Miniskirts: Australian Women in the Vietnam War", Chapter 'Children of the Conflict', written by Siobahn McHugh and published by Double Day Books, Australia.

On April 2000, on the 25th Anniversary of the End of the Vietnam War, she launched Adopted Vietnamese International, an online organisation dedicated to providing resources and support for adopted War Orphans from Vietnam. The present membership includes adopted Vietnamese individuals from Australia, Canada, USA, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK.

In January 2001 she organised an international delegation of adopted Vietnamese to attend a Conference and Tour of Vietnam (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City/Saigon). She has also arranged adopted Vietnamese events in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia and taken part in adopted Vietnamese networking activities in Chicago, Ann Arbor and Minneapolis, USA.

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Introduction:

In 1975 as America withdrew it's remaining citizens signifying a bitter defeat in an unpopular foreign war, an order was given by the US Government to evacuate over 3000 Vietnamese citizens made up of babies and children living in South Vietnamese orphanages. This evacuation was called Operation Babylift.

I was part of an earlier adoption, arriving in Sydney in 1972. I was found in the Theosophical Orphanage in the Gia Dinh District in Saigon - now Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). My adoptive mother, Mrs Annette Williams, had flown to Saigon to adopt a baby girl and after she had chosen me, I was to be placed in The World Vision hospital until the proper documents could allow me to arrive in Australia.

The shores of America became the main destination for these orphans although children were also re-located to Canada, France, Australia and other European nations. The distribution of orphaned infants became a matter of giving orphans to families who had already applied to adopt a child. In addition, there was also an offer from individuals, moved by war footage such as the Mai Lei massacre to offer a refuge in their homes and families. As for my own mother's decision, she expressed that her reason to adopt was because she already had two biological sons and wanted to have a sister for them.

My grandmother (by adoption), Mrs Lorraine Moseley was a member of the Theosophical Society, Sydney and a founding member of my orphanage (as well as orphanages in Tibet and Nepal). Although assisting with my adoption, my grandmother had expressed disappointment with public reactions to the prospect of adopting children from Vietnam. She had described some people contacting her about adoption as behaving, "Like they were giving away puppies".

Placed in mainly white homes, the Asian children would grow up as the subject of social debate and speculation that they might encounter difficulties. However there was a lack of services to fully prepare parents on the need to ensure cultural heritage, language and identity was a part of their children's education. The emphasis was on assimilation and 'fitting in' with their family and the mainstream society in which they

were located, often far from Vietnamese American communities and Asian America in general.

Twenty-five years after their evacuation from Vietnam, as the orphans reached maturity, they would begin to be able to express how their lives were affected by adoption. Common feelings of alienation, racial inferiority and displacement began to be expressed. In addition, there was an overwhelming desire to visit Vietnam and rediscover their birth heritage, culture, language and to find surviving biological relatives.

As an adopted Vietnamese person, I have spent the last year organising services and networks with other adopted Vietnamese to address issues of alienation and identity as well as to bring about a closer connection among the adopted Vietnamese community with Vietnam. This paper is a summary of this process and it is hoped it will serve as a resource for the adopted Vietnamese community. It is also hoped that it will be useful to future adopting parents, the second generation of adopted Vietnamese coming into the West as children now, and as a means to bring about an awareness of our community to the non-adopted Vietnamese community in the West and in Vietnam.

The Adoption Debate

Adoption in the 1970s:

In the 1970s the Vietnam War was a chaotic and tragic event that created many victims and survivors. The children and babies who were placed in orphanages around Saigon had arrived there for various reasons. This included having single mothers who could not bear the shame of raising an illegitimate child, parents who were killed in the war as well as those given up by their parents in the hope they could escape the war. The plans to evacuate the children to the West led to many mothers handing over their babies to soldiers and volunteers involved in arranging the airlift of children.

Over in the West where the children were being received, there was an initial optimism and altruism towards war orphans and the response to adopting this section of war victims was overwhelming. There were reports at that time, stating that Trans-racial adoptions were successful ¹. Social workers stated that adoption placements became possible because parents, '...had no other reason but the desire to help,(and) snatched babies from desperate situations. '²

One parent stated the motivation for adoption:

"I almost hate to mention it...I saw some terrible photos of the My Lai massacre, and we just thought they were ordinary kids like ours that were lying their dead - surely it was up to ordinary people all over the world to help the children who hadn't died. So we started off'³

There were however, some individuals who worked with the supply of babies that were criticised at the time. A Vietnamese social worker once described it as:

"This one woman ...She is one of those people who will always have causes. Just now it's our babies. It could just as easily be de-sexing cats...At least she doesn't seem to (*make money from collecting orphans for adoption*) ...but someone must be paying her way - so many people are making money out of babies."⁴

The chaotic approach to the adoptee migration was described by Miss Tho - Head of World Vision's New Life Baby Home in the 1970s as:

¹ Harvey, Ian J, Australian Parents for Vietnamese Children: A Social & Psychological Study of Inter-Country Adoption, MA Thesis, Macquarie University, NSW, Australia, October 1980

² Adoption from Vietnam, The Bulletin Magazine, Australia/USA, 10 August, 1974.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

“It’s difficult to know which of these people you can trust. The whole baby business is swamped in sentimentality and it’s easy enough to think that someone’s is honestly moved by compassion and is risking everything to take a child to a better life in a richer country...we sometimes have been very disappointed.”⁵

Adoption in the 1980s:

In the 1980s, a growing awareness of the impact of such adoptions began to appear in academic papers and some current affairs magazines. The questions raised at this stage originated from the western adult community and stood as a valid recognition that the process of Trans-racial adoption would lead to greater complexities although initial objectives had been largely successful.

By 1980 the adopted war orphans were aged between five to ten. Many of the children would be very healthy and show no trace of the sick malnourished orphan babies they once were. A Western diet and their adoptive family environment meant the children would most likely match the physical fitness and level of English fluency of any other Western children. By this time children would also identify as being the daughter/son and brother/sister of their adoptive families. The assimilation into being a member of a Western family appeared to be and largely was successful.

The issue of race or colour and a feeling of “difference” for the adopted Vietnamese would emerge due to outside influences. During earlier years in the family home, it was easy to believe there was no real difference between the adopted Vietnamese and the rest of the family. However, on beginning school the adopted Vietnamese began seeing large groups of other children who had families all of the same skin colour. It was also a time when the Asian adopted children would often for the first time be asked by children why they were a different colour from their family.

Writer Ian Harvey highlighted the need at the time to look at the environment the children were growing up beyond the level of economic stability. Harvey states:

“There is a growing need to discuss ... the advantages and disadvantages and reflecting on how well did projects like Operation Babylift meet the basic rights and needs of the children? How did it affect the adoptive parents, and more importantly, who were the type of people who were adopting the children – and what was the quality of life produced for the adoptees?”

⁵ Ibid

...Present and future intercountry adoption *should* be judged, not only by the quality of life generally available to adoptees in the country of adoption, but by the special and unique legacy bestowed on them resulting from the all important characteristics, qualities and substance of the adoptive parents, their families and the...communities in which they make their homes.”⁶

I was aged five in my first year of school when Caucasian children began to ask me why my Asian eyes ‘looked funny’ and why my mother was white. My mother had the hard task of explaining to me that although I was her daughter, I in fact, had a biological mother who looked just like me. I was told that she was too poor to look after me and had put me in an orphanage where I could find a family who were in a position to give me safety, shelter and who would love me like I was their own. In her attempts to explain this to me, it was always stressed that I was special and that she was to be thought of as my mother and I her daughter.

The taunts at school continued however. It was hard to feel special when I was made to feel inferior due to my physical differences to not just my playmates, but my family. As an adult I now know that severe discrimination was the fate of many orphans left back in Saigon, but as a child in a non-Asian family, a mainly non-Asian school and non-Asian society, my minority status did indeed lead to feelings of alienation and inferiority. The unfortunate thing my adoptive parents could not foresee was that I did not have any Asian looking people to access to see that I was not so different, and to convince me that my physical appearance was not a disadvantage.

Adoption in the 1990s:

In the 1990s, as the adopted Vietnamese reached their late teens and twenties, an even greater need for exploration of the affects of Trans-racial adoption began to grow more evident – the voice of the war orphans was beginning to reach maturity. As the last decade proved, children were too young to fully understand their situation and had to rely on their parents for reassurance that their differences did not mean they were inferior. The explanations of why a child was adopted were also usually answered by the parents with simplified answers which usually only satisfied younger children.

As the adopted Vietnamese became older, deeper answers were sought and many parents found a lack of resources to deal with more complex issues such as the desire to find birth parents and re-connect with a Vietnamese heritage.

⁶ Harvey, Ian J, Australian Parents for Vietnamese Children: A Social & Psychological Study of Inter-Country Adoption, MA Thesis, Macquarie University, NSW, Australia, October 1980

The great need for the complexities of the adopted Vietnamese experience to be further discussed was stated by one Journalist in the following manner:

“For years, the adopting parents have been the source of information, the shapers of perception about the policy (of foreign adoption) ...But now the children from that first wave of inter-country adoptions are adults. They are speaking about the experiment ...and what they have to say is often sobering, uncomfortable, and angry. It is also probably hurtful.”⁷.

My own mother had tried to make me fit in and feel a part of the family in my younger years and her authority on most matters went mostly unquestioned. However as I reached my teenager years my questions became more complex. I began to change from being sad to being angry. I no longer believed I did fit in with my family and the anger I felt from racism began to be shot back at my adoptive parents rather than the ignorant people who abused me because I was Asian. I went back to the source of why I was being targeted as an outsider and saw that it began with my being an Asian child in Australia, to being an Asian child in a very non-Asian environment.

Rena Briand – an organiser of several hundred intercountry adoptions who did not take heed of criticisms during the 1970s was interviewed in 1993 saying:

“That little child’s not necessarily going to be grateful or sweet forever...(and) some of these children were terribly disturbed, and that usually doesn’t come out until their teens and there’s nothing you can do. I know more than one case where the child is schizophrenic because of what they went through...I suppose a lot wouldn’t be alive now if they hadn’t been adopted, but some parents have gone through utter hell”.⁸

As an adopted Vietnamese, I was grateful for my economic stability but did not feel grateful for the racism I received. I felt very different from my family and knew I could never feel just like one of them but it wasn’t until diversity became a popular phrase, that I could find any social value in being the only Asian in a Caucasian family. However, the social pressure on my adoptive family was most likely difficult for them as they were not prepared to handle deeper issues of race and how it affected my sense of identity.

⁷Horin, Adele, Adopting identities, Sydney Morning Herald, NSW Australia, 17 September, 1999

⁸McHugh, Siobahn ‘Children of The Conflict’ Minefields and Miniskirts: Australian Women and the Vietnam War, Double Day Books, Australia, 1993

Adoption in the new Millennium: Exploring and Celebrating Diversity

Twenty-five years after the evacuation of the war orphans the initial optimism by parents and some social workers about adoption from Vietnam has now begun to include more sober discussions by the adopted Vietnamese.



PHOTO: December 1972 – I. Williams was part of the first arrival of Vietnamese orphans to Sydney, Australia. Photographed at Sydney Airport with adoptive mother, Mrs Annette Williams.

The adult world that decided the fate of the Vietnamese orphans was motivated by the evaluation that the children would be offered relatively safer, wealthier and more stable environments than if the children had remained in war-torn Saigon. In reports from the adopted Vietnamese in recent surveys, feelings of inferiority due to racism and isolation due to cultural displacement were unfortunately some of the side effects that still were felt up to early adulthood.

In an adoption survey of an adopted Vietnamese Reunion held on the 25th Anniversary of Operation Babylift by the adoption agency, Holt International which placed around 30% of the evacuated children, the survey reported that most individuals had experienced some form of discrimination while they were growing up. The Reunion Survey reported that, "Race (57%) was cited more often as the basis for discrimination than was adoption (20%)."⁹

The physical appearance of the Vietnamese adoptees is a diverse one, including Asian, Eurasian and African-American Asian. An adopted Vietnamese expresses this diversity saying:

⁹Donaldson, Evan. P Adoption Institute PRESENTATION OF PRELIMINARY SURVEY RESULTS, Reunion of First Generation of Vietnamese Adoptees Survey, Washington USA, 2000

“I was called 'chink,' 'gook,' 'slant eye,' and 'chop suey'...I was even told to go back to my country...I am half African American and half Vietnamese, but to almost anyone that sees me, they would think I am just African American...in school, I was discouraged from taking certain classes because of my race.”¹⁰

In some cases, alienation also included the Vietnamese American community. Also, in the community, often the adopted Vietnamese would, despite having a different biological family and heritage, grow up with the language and culture of their adoptive family. This made connection to the Vietnamese community more difficult.

In relation to this issue one Vietnamese adoptee stated:

“I get stared at, because I am always with non-Asian peoples. I don't speak the language, which doesn't hinder interaction with people my own age or younger, but does with older Asians. I typically cannot really tell if people are Vietnamese unless it comes up in conversation. I have been told my mannerisms are very different than the typical Vietnamese girl, which I am glad, cuz I want to be anything but typical. This creates weird misunderstandings from bizarre cultural assumptions that some people have, but oh well. For the most part I don't hang out with too many Vietnamese Americans unless we have stuff in common (like adoptees.)”¹¹

The family unit in many cases was unbalanced as the Reunion Survey reported that; “The majority of (adoptees) were raised by Caucasian mothers and fathers. Most participants (66%) grew up in Caucasian neighbourhoods. While growing up, the majority ... had only Caucasian friends, but a number reported having friends who were Vietnamese or Asian (35%) or of other (non-Asian) ethnic backgrounds (15%).”¹²

The Reunion Survey interestingly stated that while growing up that a quarter of the adopted individuals viewed themselves as Asian or Vietnamese.

As adults, they were far more likely to consider themselves Vietnamese-American (51%) and less likely to describe yourselves as Caucasian (2%).¹³

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹Williams, I, The Vietnamese War Orphans & The Children Adopted from Vietnam Post War

Research paper presentation to Vietnamese Adoptees Network (VAN) and Mamnon Organisation, 19th August, Chicago, USA, 2000

¹²Donaldson, Evan. P Adoption Institute PRESENTATION OF PRELIMINARY SURVEY RESULTS, Reunion of First Generation of Vietnamese Adoptees Survey, Washington USA, 2000

Other adoptees struggled with being Vietnamese or Asian versus being "white," by stating that you were a "white person in an Vietnamese body; "or "I felt Caucasian, yet I was always surprised to see an Asian person looking back at me in the mirror." Others of you identified yourselves as "African-American;" or "wanting blonde hair and blue eyes." Some of you identified with your adoptive family's heritage or culture, "Vietnamese French Black; "or "NorwegianVietnamese American."¹⁴

The identity building of the adopted Vietnamese was diverse process, as it was made up of several different racial mixtures. Vietnam has a history of foreign occupation from China, France, USA, Australia, Canada, Korea, Japan as well as it's own ethnic groupings of Cambodian, Thai, Laotian, Indonesian and what are known as the tribal groups including the Muong people. What separates the adopted Vietnamese from others is how their sense of identity has been affected by their placement into non-biological families. To be half Asian and half African American in a Caucasian German family for example, the individual has a range of cultures, racial groups and languages to draw a sense of heritage and belonging from.

However, the sense of validation of belonging to a community rather than just a member of a race is affected by such diversity. Adopted Vietnamese have had the challenge of fitting into their families while physically; they are clearly not biologically related. The second problem is that due to their upbringing, they usually do not speak their birth language or have a birth culture knowledge to instantly connect to the Vietnamese people. Reports of rejection from both groups as "being one of them" has often increased a sense of isolation rather than a choice of heritage, leaving the individuals as outsiders.

Despite these problems, when these individuals identify themselves as part of the adopted Vietnamese community, a sense of belonging or commonality does emerge – ironically because of their diversity and questions of identity. One adopted Vietnamese who attended a meeting¹⁵ of adult war orphans stated:

"I met a boy...I did not believe he was Vietnamese because of his black skin...Nobody would ever guess we were there to embrace the Vietnamese culture. We had black skin, yellow skin, white skin and some were mixed-Asian or pure. As far as I could tell, my short height, dark skin, straight black hair and slanty eyes made me pure Vietnamese. But if anyone else glanced

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Holt International, Reunion of the First Adopted Vietnamese, 30th April, Baltimore, USA, 2000

closer he or she would notice one dominant feature common among all of us: Asian eyes. And behind those almond-brown pupils was a yearning to be embraced by a single group with unique experiences and one question out of thousands: Who am I supposed to be?"¹⁶

Diversity or difference is a key bonding factor of the adopted Vietnamese community. As the Reunion reports show, there exists a strong sense of being the "other" or "outsider" from the adopted family is based on biology and heritage. The adopted individual looks physically different and cannot visually blend in with their family. However, when set in an environment such as a Reunion for families with adopted Vietnamese the individuals can see that many other adoptees' parents and families look just like theirs.

An adopted Vietnamese who attended the same Reunion stated a feeling of finally belonging:

"I went to the Reunion of the First Generation Vietnamese adoptees. It was very rewarding and very emotional weekend for all of us. Some of us cried while others were teary-eyed like myself. I finally got some inner peace and some closure in my life now that I have met others like me".¹⁷

The meeting of people with a similar background at this Reunion was considered a successful activity that was later repeated by other adoption agencies across the United States and overseas. As the statement above shows, for some it provided closure to some of the issues that exist for people adopted from Vietnam. For others though, it highlighted a deeper need to investigate and seek further support and interaction. Where such an event proved useful for most people was that it brought together a group of people who could identify common issues and for both adopted Vietnamese and adoptive parents, provide a chance to find out how they could overcome them.

Adopted Vietnamese Diaspora

The idea of a homeland is the something that unites the adopted Vietnamese community. Many adopted Vietnamese have visited their birth country in recent times and many others express a desire to go back and explore their

¹⁶Williams, I, The Vietnamese War Orphans & The Children Adopted from Vietnam Post War

Research paper presentation to Vietnamese Adoptees Network (VAN) and Mam Non Organisation, 19th August, Chicago, USA, 2000

¹⁷ Ibid

heritage and also to search for any surviving relatives. However, in the West, there is also a desire to connect with Vietnam by learning the language, participating in cultural events like the Tet Festival and then cultural activities like cooking Vietnamese food, reading translated Vietnamese poetry and investigating other Vietnamese arts such as literature and film.

Using the Catalyst Foundation Organisation as a case study, the adopted Vietnamese community and the desire to connect with Vietnamese culture and heritage is illustrated in its Heritage Camp program held annually.

The Heritage camp provides programs and activities for children as young as 3 years old, including Vietnamese language, dance, folktales, traditional songs, and arts & crafts. Counselors whom are young Vietnamese adults will lead each program.

Adult programs are designed to promote learning more about their child's culture, provide information and support on adoption issues, and other areas of interest to parents and extended families.¹⁸

The Catalyst Foundation's Director, Carolyn Ticarro-Parker, is a Vietnamese American who adopted two children from Vietnam. In a meeting I held with her in August 2000 in Minneapolis, she spoke of the importance of keeping the adopted child's heritage available should they wish to explore it. Although her children have the advantage of having a Vietnamese mother, she provides the option for parents and adopted Vietnamese to learn more about the Vietnam through her organisations activities.

The extra advantage of Ms Ticarro-Parker's perspective and involvement in adoption from Vietnam, is that she reinforces the validity of adopting children left in orphanages in Vietnam from a non-Caucasian perspective giving the adoptive parents community more diversity.

Like many of the non-Asian adoptive parents, she both wanted to adopt a child and was also aware of the poor situation for orphans in Vietnam. A big part of her work with the Catalyst Foundation includes charity for the orphans who are not adopted and she has also arranged aid expeditions inviting adopted Vietnamese and parents to visit Vietnam and help children in orphanages. Where Ticarro-Parker progresses from the adoptive parents in the 1970s, it is in her belief to promote 'public awareness and avocation for increased adoptions of orphaned or abandoned Vietnamese children and to

¹⁸ Catalyst Foundation Organisation, Vietnam Culture Camp Brochure, September 7-9, 2001, Camp Courage - Maple Lake, MN, USA

provide post-adoption resources for families with children adopted from Vietnam.’¹⁹

A large part of the post-adoption resources emerging in organisations designed to assist the adopted Vietnamese community now celebrate and encourage exploration of Vietnamese culture and heritage and contact with the Vietnamese community. The focus on making an adopted Vietnamese child fit in with their non-Vietnamese family contributed to a lot of the problems emerging in the 1980s to new millennium. As an adopted Vietnamese my own attempts to fit in with my family failed. I believed I could never be accepted as one of them especially from a physical point of view (visually and biologically) and I also felt that I did have a different heritage and ancestors that I wanted to explore.

As for my parents, I felt that they had difficulties supporting my endeavors in this regard. New events and organisations that encourage parents to become more aware about adoption issues will contribute to helping both adopted Vietnamese and parents begin such explorations. Adoptive mother Lea Ann Kaplan participated in a heritage camp and reported:

“This summer my husband Keith, our son Theodore Hieu and I traveled to a Vietnamese Heritage Camp in Colorado. Keith and I adopted our son on March 9, 1998 in Hoa Binh, Vietnam... I personally reaffirmed my appreciation for the diversity ... I think we have many resources to bring Asian culture into our homes naturally. I felt another rewarding experience when other parents understood our complicated issues because they had experienced them too. I mentioned our son being the perfect child for our family, and everyone knew exactly how I felt.”²⁰

An example of the Vietnamese community bringing about closer connections to culture and heritage for adoptive Vietnamese families is the Mam Non Organisation, Ann Arbor, USA. Mam Non was started in 1999 by Linh Lam to support the Vietnamese adoption community. Lam, also an Asian American activist and founding member of the Vietnam Women’s Forum, USA, was introduced to the community after her parents adopted her younger brother; the first Vietnamese-Americans to adopt from northern Vietnam.

Mam Non’s Mission Statement sets the following goals:

¹⁹ Ticarro-Parker, C, ‘Adoption Advocacy’ Catalyst Foundation, MN, USA, 2001

²⁰ Kaplan, Lea An, ‘Vietnamese Heritage Camp 2000’, Heritage Camps For Adoptive Families Organisation, CO, USA, August, 2000

- 1.To support the adoption community in exploring Vietnamese culture through forums and cultural events.
- 2.To promote communication between the adoption and Vietnamese communities for their shared concern for Vietnamese children.
- 3.To encourage critical analysis of Asian, Vietnamese, and American identities.²¹

The first two goals are similar to other organisations that run heritage camps and reunions. However, the third goal is set apart by it's challenging of Western stereotypes. As an adopted Vietnamese I experienced a strange mixture of wanting to identify myself as Asian rather than Caucasian like my family, yet the racist remarks and stereotypes of Asians often made identifying closely to my Caucasian family more desirable. Although I looked Asian, I didn't feel I fit stereotypes of the brilliant mathematician, non-athletic, non-sexual or overly sexual Asians seen in popular Western movie characters or within parodies in advertisements.

The third goal listed in Mam Non's mission statement is important for the process of building identities among adopted Vietnamese, as it is more likely to fit in with their diversity. In a discussion with Ms Lam in a meeting in Chicago, USA in August 2000 there was no noticeable difference between her and myself even though a Vietnamese family had raised her compared to my Caucasian parents. We both spoke fluent English with no accent, had dated outside our race and even though we were not married, we no longer lived with our parents. The typical stereotypes of Asian females didn't apply to either of us.

In a discussion with another adopted Vietnamese in Sydney, Australia in June 2001, an individual who was also female, spoke of going to a camp for Vietnamese youth where she felt she had nothing in common with fellow camp-goers and believed it was her adoption that set her apart. She spoke of the Vietnamese females speaking with accents, that they did not have any non-Vietnamese friends and that they all still lived at home with their parents even though they were in their mid-twenties.

It was clear from our discussions that she felt isolated from feeling Vietnamese or any connection with the Western Vietnamese community from her experience at the camp. If organisations like Mam Non show that the Vietnamese in the West or Viet Kieu are as diverse as the adopted

²¹ Lam, Linh 'Mission Statement', Mam Non Organisation, Ann Arbor, USA, 1998

Vietnamese community, then such feelings of alienation from the Vietnamese community can perhaps be overcome. The Mam Non site not only provides profiles of a variety of mixed race adopted Vietnamese individuals but also of Vietnamese American youth like Mimi Nguyen who is a Queer Writer/Activist as well as stories like “Tami the Vietnamese Surfer Girl”.

In January 2001 I arranged a trip for adopted Vietnamese to return to HCMC for the Tet Festival. There were eight adopted Vietnamese and two adoptive parents in the delegation. A big disappointment expressed by the delegates was that they didn't feel Vietnamese. Many local people tried to guess where we were from and often didn't think we were Vietnamese. It was here where our accents, style of dress and manners set us apart.

In a discussion with a Vietnamese American performance artist also visiting HCMC at the same time as the adoptees, Maura Nguyen pointed out some interesting similarities between her experiences and that of the adopted Vietnamese. Her mother was Vietnamese but her father was an American soldier. She was raised in America and speaks with an American accent and has Western dress style and manners. She also had people tell her she didn't look Vietnamese but due to the fact she knew her birth mother, she wasn't so sensitive to these comments.

The most important activity undertaken by most delegates on this trip were searches for records and birth parents. The group visited their orphanages and the villages where they were reported to have been born. People who claimed to have information that could help actually approached several adopted Vietnamese though this information was not verified.

The need to connect with Vietnam was shared by both the Vietnamese Americans and adopted Vietnamese I spoke to while travelling in Vietnam. The biggest difference was that the adopted Vietnamese individuals were searching for origins that were far more difficult to find than just visiting a birth town or learning about the Vietnamese culture and language. It was a fact that many of the birth records of adopted Vietnamese had either been lost or were not reliable. The search for birth parents was extremely difficult for many of the visiting adoptees and the lack of language to communicate and investigate with made matters even worse.

Conclusion:

Although reunions, heritage camps and trips to Vietnam have all been developed to assist the adopted Vietnamese community, the final issue that is still difficult to resolve is the acquisition of detailed information about birth parents. The next step for this community, is the setting up of proper services and support for this activity while not threatening the adoptions of homeless orphans in Vietnam.

Today adoptees from Vietnam to the West usually have more information about their birth parents. In some cases the adoptive parents may even meet the birth mother in what is known as "Open Adoptions" where the adoptive family sponsor sends reports to the actual mother on how her child is progressing over in a new Western. There is debate over such programs but if a child will be put in an orphanage, then it is the goal to have them placed with a family. If information or contact with the birth parent can be supplied in the future when the adopted Vietnamese desires it, then this is one way the process can be facilitated.

Adopted Vietnamese organisations and networks are increasingly able to facilitate adopted Vietnamese involvement as the first generation of war orphans who were adopted to the West are now reaching maturity. Some former adoptees have even begun to adopt from Vietnam themselves. As the following generations of adopted Vietnamese begin to grow older, it is hoped that the social problems discussed in this paper become less extreme due to the resources that are now emerging. As the first generation of adopted Vietnamese begin to acquire the opportunity to express their identity in essays, poems, documentaries and films the resources for the following generation will be more balanced and perhaps act as a bridge between adoptive parents, adopted Vietnamese and the Vietnamese community.

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