The Chinese/Vietnamese Diaspora
Revisiting the boat people

Edited by
Yuk Wah Chan

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The Chinese/Vietnamese Diaspora

Over three decades have passed since the first wave of Indochinese refugees left their homelands. These refugees, mainly the Vietnamese, fled from war and strife in search of a better life elsewhere. By investigating the Vietnamese diaspora in Asia, this book sheds new light on the Asian refugee era (1975–91), refugee settlement and different patterns of host-guest interactions that will have implications for refugee studies elsewhere. The book provides:

- a clearer historical understanding of the group dynamics among refugees—the ethnic Chinese 'Vietnamese refugees' from both the North and South as well as the northern 'Vietnamese refugees'.
- an examination of different aspects of migration including: planning for migration, choices of migration route, and reasons for migration.
- an analysis of the ethnic and refugee politics during the refugee era, and the subsequent settlement and resettlement.

This book will be of interest to students and scholars of globalization, migration, ethnicities, refugee histories and politics.

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Revisiting an era of refugees and boat people
Part III

Hong Kong and beyond
10 Sojourn in Hong Kong, settlement in America
Experiences of Chinese-Vietnamese refugees
Jonathan H. X. Lee

What does it mean to be Chinese? Vietnamese? Or perhaps Chinese-Vietnamese? What does it mean to be Asian American? Contextualized in the transformed Asian American landscape resulting from the manner in which Vietnamese refugees were introduced into America, this chapter explores the politics of identity formation in post 1965 and post 1975 transformation in Asian America. It examines issues of bicultural and bilingual mixed-race Chinese-Vietnamese refugee Americans.

The term Chinese-Vietnamese American reflects what many consider to be America’s strength: Diversity. This signifier reflects three complementary yet competing national, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious social groups and identities. Moreover, it reveals the inherent diversity associated within Chinese or Vietnamese or American, and bespeaks of the heterogeneous nature of Chinese America and Vietnamese America. Understanding and accepting their inherent diversities will inevitably impact political representation and enfranchisement, and possibly address the social, educational, economic, and health issues directly impacting several Southeast Asian refugee communities in America, in particular, Chinese-Vietnamese Americans. The “model minority” stereotype that suggests that Asian Americans (as a homogenous category) are somehow exemplary “Americans” when compared to other ethnic groups (like Blacks, Native Americans, and Latinos) ignores the real needs and concerns of refugee Southeast Asian Americans (like Vietnamese, Hmong, Lao, and Cambodian Americans). Asian American scholars, activists, and community workers are aware of the negative consequences of lumping refugees Southeast Asian Americans into the “model minority,” but the US Census and major funding institutions (e.g. Ford Foundation) have yet to accept these communities as distinct entities with specific needs, which results in racializing them as “Asian” and perpetuating disparities in access to educational, social, and political resources. In their having to claim one or the other ethnicity and ancestry, there has been a dearth of studies addressing their actual needs and concerns—which has created a long-standing problem for the Chinese-Vietnamese American communities in America.

A considerable number of Chinese-Vietnamese refugees arrived in America via Hong Kong. The duration of their stay in Hong Kong varied, but their displacement from Vietnam connects them all. Changing immigration patterns has
drastically transformed what it means to be Asian in America. This chapter provides an experiential account of first-generation refugee resettlement and the formation of identities for Chinese-Vietnamese refugees who arrived in America via Hong Kong. An examination of generational conflicts and historical awareness among the first generation and their American-born children will illuminate the complex process of identity formation and community identification. Although the dislocation and displacement was a tremendous reference point for refugees, the powerful forces of American cultural values and ideals have caused intergenerational fractures. The process of settlement and integration into American society has thus been uneven, slippery, and difficult.

Historical backdrop

The liberalization of immigration policy after 1965 paralleled the changing mainstream attitudes, perceptions, and conceptions of American culture. The initial American perception of Chinese immigrants during the early nineteenth century was ambiguously affirmative: they were seen as industrious and hygienic, and most likely capable of becoming good citizens. But once economic competition in agriculture and gold mining increased, the attitude quickly shifted to one of discrimination, followed by total exclusion that was informed by fervent xenophobia. The first decade of the twentieth century ushered in the great image of the “melting pot,” a process of assimilation by which diverse peoples from around the world assembled on American soil and, over a period of time, acculturated themselves into mainstream American life (Lee 2006). Chinese immigrants, however, did not straightforwardly melt into American mainstream society.

The end of the Second World War ushered in the counter-cultural movements that began to question the normative perception and conception of American social life and brought with it a re-evaluation of the expectation that immigrants would assimilate into mainstream society (Lee 2006: 238). The civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s did not merely express dissatisfaction with racial and prejudicial beliefs and public policies, but also revealed a deep-seated quandary with the principle of assimilation. To the extent that the American way of life was normatively white, Protestant, heterosexual, and middle-class, it was unfeasible for various segments of the population to ever become completely “American.” The imagined consensus promoted by those who favored assimilation could only be sustained by excluding people with dark skin, non-European ancestries, and limited incomes—in particular Asian immigrants. The civil rights movement not only insisted on sensible changes in public policies, it also demanded a transformation and reconstitution of American national self-identity; it insisted that America recognize and reconstitute itself to be a pluralistic society, and that there were manifold and legitimate alternative ways of being American. This produced the pluralistic perception of American life, envisioning it as a “salad bar”—multifarious: culturally, religiously, linguistically, ethnically, politically, sexually, socially, economically, and nationally.

Between 1882 and 1965, exclusionist ideologies gave way to the melting pot attitude, which, beginning in the 1980s, then gave way to the ideology of cultural pluralism, which continues to dominate public discourse. Since 1965 there has been a rejuvenation of Chinatown communities across the United States, especially in large metropolitan areas such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston, New York, Chicago, and Houston. At the same time, these regions have experienced the formation of “new” Chinatowns in rural areas (Kwong 1979, 1996). In all these areas, the development of new Chinatowns has taken place and continues to occur because of a continual flow of Chinese immigrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China, and various Indo-Chinese subpopulations from Southeast Asia (e.g. Sino-Vietnamese, Sino-Malaysians, Sino-Khmers, and Sino-Thais).

New strangers on the shores: Vietnamese refugees

Post-1975, immigration reveals the dynamic changes in the Asian American landscape in general, and the Chinese American landscape in particular, which was significantly reconfigured by Indo-Chinese immigrants who arrived in the United States following the Fall of Saigon. As the United States pulled out of the disastrous Vietnam War in April 1975, about 130,000 Vietnamese, who were generally highly-skilled and well-educated and who feared retaliation for their close associations with Americans, were airlifted by the US government to bases in the Philippines, Guam, and Wake Island in the Northern Pacific Ocean (Chan 2006: 63). Although the task of resettling the initial wave of refugees from Vietnam (130,000 Vietnamese and 5,000 Cambodians) was complete by the end of 1975, many refugee-seekers continued to leave Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam after the American evacuation and resettlement efforts ended (Chan 2006: 65).

By late 1977, as the number of boat refugee-seekers increased—reaching an average of 1500 refugee-seekers a month—Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia, unable to accommodate them, began to push the boats back to sea. Pressured by the international community for its moral and social responsibility, the United States began to respond through legislation. To counter the humanitarian crisis, President Jimmy Carter ordered the Seventh Fleet to seek vessels in distress in the South China Sea. A sizeable percentage of refugees coming from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were of ethnic-Chinese backgrounds, speaking either Cantonese or the Chaozhou dialects.

From 1978 to 1989 ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese were persecuted amid international power struggles: there was increasing ethnic tension between Vietnamese and Chinese-Vietnamese. Fear of being pushed into the jungles resulted in 160,000 ethnic Chinese from all over Vietnam migrating to China’s southern provinces (Whitmore 1996: 88–89; Chan 2006: 73–74). By the end of this exodus, nearly a quarter million Chinese-Vietnamese had returned to China (Chan 2006: 74).

The Hong Kong transient detention centers

Hong Kong was one of the Asian places receiving the refugees. In May 1975, it encountered its first batch of roughly 4000 boat people, who were picked up by a
Danish ship in the South China Sea. In 1978, nearly 9000 arrived by small boats. Some were ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese merchants who were able to utilize their contacts in Hong Kong to arrange for their passage. By spring 1979 Hong Kong housed 17,000 boat people. Sucheng Chan (2006: 77) notes,

The local people resented them tremendously because the Hong Kong government was very tough in the way it handled would-be refugee-seekers from the People’s Republic of China: Hong Kong’s border guards caught and deported them to the Chinese mainland without mercy. By allowing the Vietnamese boat people to stay, its critics said, the Hong Kong government was following a double standard, showing far greater leniency to the refugee-seekers from Vietnam than from those from China. Members of Hong Kong’s Legislative Council were also angry: They felt that Great Britain was doing nothing to relieve Hong Kong, its crown colony, of its burden, yet gave the colony no authority to deal with the situation on its own. Despite these complaints, no one foresaw that the worst was yet to come.

Vi, a first-generation Chinese-Vietnamese American recalls being unable to land in Hong Kong. She says, “I was 13 years old when I escaped Vietnam. The 10 day journey to Hong Kong was rough because the boat was constantly attacked by waves. I arrived in Hong Kong in 1982.” By the time Vi’s ship arrived in Hong Kong, the refugees camps were full. She says, “Our boat was blocked off and the officials sent us to a different camp, which is how I arrived in the Philippines. I lived in the refugee camp for six months. Finally, I was sponsored by a Catholic Church, and arrived in the United States in 1984.”

The trafficking of refugees became a lucrative business in Vietnam and resulted in an international refugee crisis. The massive influx of new refugee-seekers placed greater and greater pressure on the limited resources in Hong Kong, which resulted in changing policies. A conference convened by United Nations Secretary General Kurt Waldheim in Geneva on July 17–19, 1979; along with the participation of the United States, Great Britain representing Hong Kong, and ASEAN countries all agreed that something had to be done to assist the country of first asylum (Hong Kong). The Geneva Conference resulted in immediate change, although the Hong Kong government became increasingly bitter because it was shouldering 35 per cent of the boat people, but was allocated only 13 per cent of the resettlement to countries of second asylum slots, which limits the number of refugees that could leave Hong Kong (Chan 2006: 81–82).

The United States responded to the international refugee crisis by increasing its intake of refugees to 168,000 per year. Soon afterwards, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980 as a way to facilitate the resettlement of refugees. The Act established the Office of Refugee Resettlement within the Department of Health and Human Services to administer the domestic resettlement program, by which refugees could receive cash assistance, medical assistance, and supportive services to ease their initial adjustment to the United States, and ultimately facilitate their economic self-sufficiency. Henceforth, a sizeable portion of Chinese-Vietnamese refugees arrived in the United States after spending time in Hong Kong.

The passage from Vietnam to Hong Kong was not easy, as first-generation Chinese-Vietnamese refugees recall. Mrs. Lê recalls,

The boat ride was horrible. It was a small boat with too many people. Everyone was throwing up and could not sleep. I barely saw the daylight. I lost count of how long it took us to get to Hong Kong. All I remember was the long days and endless nights.

Many waited for varied time intervals before being informed that they would be able to immigrate to America. Mrs. Ngô says,

I would do a lot of cleaning, cooking and sleeping to pass the time. I spent so much time there I understood and spoke Cantonese. I did not like the people there. They were so mean and they thought they could take advantage of me because I was a foreigner.

Mr. Cao confided,

The reason why I had access to Hong Kong is because I knew how to fix boats, which made me the go-to person to fix the very boats the refugees use to flee.

The Chinese-Vietnamese refugees’ memories of Hong Kong are ambivalent. Hùng, who arrived to Hong Kong at age sixteen recalls the American Red Cross delivering food twice a week. He remembers his mother feeling lonely and scared, so while in the refugee camp, she prayed to the Buddha, hoping to get sponsored to the United States. The primary recollection of their experience in the refugee camps in Hong Kong was marked by waiting. Another informant Mrs. Lee told me that time seemed to move slowly because she was waiting for the paperwork to move to America. She has nothing good or bad to say about her time in a refugee camp in Hong Kong.

Memory of these Chinese-Vietnamese and Vietnamese who had passed through Hong Kong briefly seems to focus on their American experience, as Hong Kong is merely a transitory centre, and experiences there are forgettable, whereas experiences in America are viewed and understood as more permanent. The average length of stay for the majority of subjects interviewed was six months to two years. However, all of them stated that they were lucky and fortunate because their stay in Hong Kong was short, compared to other people they know who stayed for five years or more. Several mentioned knowing someone that stayed in the refugee camps in Hong Kong for nine to ten years.

Getting settled in America

Scholarship on Southeast Asian refugees lump Chinese-Vietnamese refugees with Vietnamese refugees, very little is known about the 25 per cent of this refugee population (Rumbaut 1996: 322). The majority of the Chinese-Vietnamese refugees living in the United States today entered during the second wave period between 1978 and 1982 (Trieu 2009: 21, 24). Like many refugees before them,
the new arrivals had to be processed and resettled in America. Upon arriving in the United States, refugees were first sent to four government reception centers located at Camp Pendleton, California; Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania; Fort Chaffee, Arkansas; and Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. There, they were interviewed by voluntary agencies and matched with country-wide sponsors. They were initially distributed across all 50 states to minimize the negative impact of a refugee population. Despite the government's attempt to disperse the refugee population, as a result of tertiary migration from other states, California emerged as a concentrated centre. In southern California, a sizeable population of Vietnamese refugees reside in Los Angeles, Orange County, and San Diego. In northern California, they are located in the Silicon Valley city of San Jose.

The immigration of the Vietnamese refugees to America is generally divided into two periods (Do 1999: 26). The first period is divided into three waves. The first Vietnamese came just before the Fall of Saigon, bringing between 10,000 and 15,000 refugees to America (Do 1999: 26). The second wave brought some 80,000 refugees during the Fall of Saigon, most of whom were airlifted by helicopter. These refugees worked with the Americans and many had marketable skills and spoke at least functional English (Do 1999: 26). This wave benefited from the large-scale guilt that Americans struggled with because of the war, which was translated into providing social services and ample government resources to assist in their resettlement. The third wave witnessed 40,000 to 60,000 refugees who fled Vietnam, but by this time American guilt was wearing thin (Do 1999: 27).

The refugees who began to flee Vietnam after 1978 are what Hien Duc Do (1999) calls the second period refugees. These refugees were considerably worse off than those who had escaped during the first period. After 1978 most of the refugees attempted escape in small boats that were not seaworthy (Do 1999: 28). Mr. and Mrs. Ly remember:

We paid three pieces of gold for passage out of Vietnam. We were crammed into a small boat with seventy-five other people. For twenty days, we were out at sea with no food or fresh water. There were no bathrooms, so people had to excrete waste off the side of the boat. People vomiting and getting seasick was common. We arrived at Hong Kong and they government quickly placed us in a refugee camp. We stayed there for two years. We learned a little English and waited for our time to leave.

Many of these ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese boat people risked their lives to escape Vietnam. Some successfully made it to America, but many more were sent to detention facilities where they either stayed temporarily until they were shipped back to Vietnam or remained permanently. Many ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese who had long ago made Vietnam their home also left during the second period, specifically between 1978 and 1980 (Do 1999: 27). Unlike the refugees who fled during the first period, they did not benefit from America's guilty conscience; rather, they entered during a period of economic recession caused by a decline in the real estate market and high unemployment, which translated into "compassion fatigue." Anti-refugee Americans invoked the popular question of the day: "Why are we taking care of the refugees from Indochina, and not our own people?" (See Taggart Siegel's 1987 film, Blue Collar and Buddha).

**First impressions**

Upon arriving to America, many refugees felt ambivalent about their situation. They were also ambivalent about their experiences in Hong Kong. Overwhelmed by the new environment, they felt like fish-out-of-water, and they struggled with survivor's guilt. Even so, for Chinese-Vietnamese refugees, their dual ethnicity and ability to speak both Chinese and Vietnamese proved to be useful. Mrs. Lâm says,

The main problem coming to America was the language barrier because neither me nor my husband spoke English, which limited our job opportunities to working for our own kind who spoke either Vietnamese or Chinese.

Mrs. Kim recalls,

When I first came to the United States, I lived with my sisters in the Tenderloin [an urban district of San Francisco]. I was afraid to do anything because I did not know how to speak English well and I did not know the area. However, when I found that there were other Vietnamese in the community as well, I felt much better because whenever I was lost, I was able to ask for directions and most importantly, I was not an outcast of the community.

After securing lodging in the new environment, one of the first priorities, was to find work. Many moved to neighborhoods known to have Vietnamese or Chinese immigrants. For instance, Mrs. La says, "The Tenderloin was the Vietnamese version of Chinatown. It was the center for all the Vietnamese refugees, mostly because of the cheap rent for the apartment, so we moved there." In seeking employment, Chinese-Vietnamese quickly realized their inability to speak English kept them from high-paying jobs, but they felt fortunate that they could work as service workers in Chinese restaurants or sweatshops. Kevin, a second-generation Chinese-Vietnamese American recalls his grandmother saying, "I was lucky to have work. I was an old woman, but I could still sew."

A survey conducted by Caplan, Whitmore, and Bui (1985) in the early 1980s shows that among the Southeast Asian refugees in Boston, Chicago, Houston, Seattle, and Orange County, Chinese-Vietnamese refugee population tended to be older than the Laotian and the Vietnamese, with an average age of 33 years. They were also not as proficient in English compared to other Indochinese refugees. Economically, compared to the ethnic Vietnamese, the Chinese-Vietnamese refugees were less likely to be in the labor force, had a lower median monthly income, and without employment and health and retirement benefits, were more likely to be dependent on government welfare programs. Overall, the Chinese-Vietnamese were invariably at a disadvantage in terms of economic integration (US Department of Health and Human Services 1982).
From refugee to American born

There are four distinct stages in the development of Vietnamese and Chinese-Vietnamese communities in America. The first stage was the wave of exiles that fled Vietnam immediately after the fall of Saigon in 1975. These exiles were primarily from middle-class backgrounds, were Catholic converts, had English proficiency, and worked with the US government before the Fall. The communities they built tended to revolve around manufacturing in California, and fishing in the Gulf Coast (e.g., Texas, and Louisiana). The second stage included refugees who arrived between 1979 and 1982. The majority of these refugees were Chinese-Vietnamese, popularly called “boat people,” arriving in large numbers. They were members of the petit bourgeoisie, were rural poor of a lower socioeconomic status, and had scant or no English skills. They were scattered by resettlement, but secondary migration led them to California and Texas, to already established Vietnamese refugee communities. The third stage occurred after the 1980s. This stage was community-oriented, based on the flourishing of ethnic businesses, civic organizations, and other community social structures that were established to serve the immigrant refugee population. The fourth stage reflects the development since the 1990s, when 1.5- and second-generation Chinese-Vietnamese Americans mature and become politically active. Their parents—refugees who fled Vietnam after 1975—began to become naturalized citizens and politically active themselves, once they acknowledged that their dream of returning to Vietnam was no longer realizable.

Similar to many immigrants before them, the first- and second-generation Chinese-Vietnamese Americans struggle to balance themselves between the forces of traditions and the new American ways, between being Chinese, Vietnamese, and American. Their parents feel this anxiety, as Mrs. Pham laments, declaring.

My first impression of America is that it is too free. Kids are raised with no traditions and moral values ... Young women are running away and getting pregnant. Boys are joining gangs and dropping out of school. America has little discipline.

Both parents and children point to language barriers as the source of their intergenerational conflict and misunderstanding. Susie, a 1.5-generation Chinese-Vietnamese American who arrived when she was five years old states,

Linguistic obstacles are by far the root of all problems in my family because it contributes to the domino effect of more problems such as changing roles within our family, stress, and anxiety about us being too American.

Another compelling example of the rift created by the language barrier between the 1.5- and second-generation and their parents is evident in Nancy’s statement,

The generation gap between my mother and me are obvious. I mostly speak English. I do not know how to cook a full Vietnamese meal. I speak my mind whenever I feel like it. I do not know much about my Vietnamese and Chinese traditions. My mother on the other hand can whip up a meal in thirty minutes. She also holds her emotions in, instead of talking about it. It is frustrating because she expects me to know, but I can’t read her mind.

For the 1.5- and second-generation Chinese-Vietnamese Americans, their development was further challenged through their encounters with racism. Hoang, a 1.5-generation Chinese-Vietnamese American says,

I went to kindergarten like everyone else. However, the first school I went to was full of Chinese immigrants, so it felt normal, like being at home. Later, after we moved, it was different and I started hearing chants like “Ching chong Chinaman sitting on a'bench ...”

Interestingly, both parents and their children are aware of the cause and source of their intergenerational conflicts. Michael, a second generation Chinese-Vietnamese American says,

My mother thinks differently than I do because we grew up in two different environments. I would not say that I identify with my mother’s experiences, but rather understand her struggles. I have never gone through what she went through, but I can understand her struggle and for that I appreciate her sacrifice.

Similarly, Barbara notes,

My mom loves her children like a lioness protecting her cubs. Although she understands that children in America have no respect for elders like the children in Vietnam. The main factors that contribute to the clash between children and parents are, first and foremost, linguistic reasons and then cultural reasons.

When Barbara and her mother get into arguments, she admits, laughingly, to saying, “This isn’t Vietnam, Mom; get used to the American culture. ... so just chill out.”

Maintaining culture, maintaining self

Children who grew up in households with first-generation refugee parents expressed their childhood experiences positively, indicating that their parents
have been successful in transmitting traditional values, morals, and customs to
them, even though they may rebel against them. Victoria, a second-generation
Chinese-Vietnamese American says,

Practicing filial piety is learning to respect and care for those around you,
especially your elders. My parents taught me to respect and care for those
around me, especially my elders. My parents taught me to respect and obey
the older generation and to care for the parent as they get older.

Conversely, Minh, a second-generation Chinese-Vietnamese American says
he learned how to be an American by watching several popular American TV
shows. He says,

I didn't have my parents or anyone as a set role model but instead I had the
actors and characters on TV to learn from. Everything I learnt about how
to act or how to think came from TV shows and most of the time it was a
white character or it was the "American way." The way I dressed came from
the commercials; the way I talked came from Saved by the Bell; the way I
treated others from Barney; my sense of right and wrong came from Power
Rangers; and what I know about sex, came from the media.

Many of the 1.5- and second-generation said that their parents did not talk to
them about important topics like sex and birth control, and that they had to rely
on their schools and friends to learn about it. They also said that much of what
they learned about social values and norms, was indirectly through the hierarchi-
cal nature of their family structure, which emphasized respect for the elders that
included their parents and their older siblings.

1.5- and second-generation Chinese-Vietnamese American identities

Among the 1.5- and second-generation Chinese-Vietnamese Americans, the
process of identity formation is complex and complicated, revealing that for
them, identity is fluid, flexible, and ever changing. Justin, a second-genera-
tion Chinese-Vietnamese American expressed a very assured identity as
American, saying, "There is no question about it: I am a genuine American
citizen, California-grown, and no one can touch that." While Sherwood indi-
cates a more nuanced and sophisticated explanation of his multiple identities,
saying:

I have my own challenges growing up as a 1.5-generation Chinese-Vietnamese
American. I speak Cantonese, English and understand Vietnamese. I cele-
brate Chinese New Year and American New Year. I listen to Asian music and
American music. My identity is very fragile and conditional in terms of my
experiences. I was born Chinese-Vietnamese in Saigon. I consider myself
absolutely Americanized but as I grow up, clashes between the American
culture and Chinese-Vietnamese culture makes me question my identity
time and time again.

Along a similar vein, expressing the difficulties of "fitting-in" and "making
friends," Robert, a 1.5-generationner says, "Being a 1.5-generation Chinese-Viet-
namese American, I strive to be accepted in my community as Chinese,
Vietnamese, and American."

One prevailing theme that most experienced and articulated is the struggle
to form and understand their identity. This is brilliantly expressed by Bao, a
second-generationner who says,

My whole life has been a constant juggle of three identities and it doesn't
help that it changes so drastically according to each situation such as going to
Chinatown, Little Saigon, or connecting with my relatives back in Vietnam,
or attending a football game. One can say having a triple identity doesn't
amount to a hindrance but instead acts as a benefactor because it opens up
you up to more opportunities.

As stated above, identity formation is a process—fluid, flexible, and changing—
well illustrated in Tiffany's comment:

Like most Vietnamese American teens it is difficult to meet the expectations
of parents while attempting to assimilate into the American culture. When
I started elementary school, my parents enrolled me in Chinese school at
the same time. At this time, I thought my identity was Chinese American.
Later, I realized that I was not only following Chinese traditions, but also
Vietnamese culture and traditions. I not only had to assimilate to the Chinese
and American cultures, but also the Vietnamese culture.

Living among multiple worlds: the politics of identity and
Asian American pan-ethnic identity

The post World War II era ushered in the counter-cultural and civil rights move-
ments that began to question the normative vision of American social life. The
American way of life was not limited to Protestants, whites, males, heterosexu-
als, and middle-class households. Assimilation favored socially constructed
notions of "white" identity, by excluding people with dark skin, non-European
ancestries, and limited incomes—in particular Asian immigrants. The civil
rights movement demanded practical changes in public policy, and a transfor-
mation of American national self-identity, insisting there were manifold and
legitimate alternate ways of being American. One result of this vibrant period
was the creation of the homogenous taxon "Asian American"—coined by his-
torian and activist Yuji Ichioka—which was initially used to describe the politi-
cally charged group identity in the ethnic consciousness movements of the 1960s
through 1970s.

There are discontinuities, tensions, and disadvantages between the ethno-spee-
cific Asian identity (e.g. Chinese-Vietnamese American) and pan-ethnic Asian
American identity. The goal and mission of the ethnic consciousness movement of
the civil rights era emphasized the individual community's rights and abilities of
self-determination. The pan-ethnic Asian American identity, while strong in numbers and, hence, politically significant, depresses the interest of individual groups, and consequently, downplays an individual community's self-determination at the expense of the larger pan-ethnic Asian American community. Ironically, this in itself is a hegemonic process of homogenization that the Asian American civil rights activists protested and fought against because it denied individuals and their respective communities a means of self-determination.

Conclusion

Chinese-Vietnamese refugees and their American-born children are understudied and under-represented. They are, unfortunately, an invisible demographic group in America's political and academic landscape, although physically they are very visible in Chinatowns and Little Saigons in most of the urban centers. The Asian American movement must shift its focus from pan-Asian American solidarity, to ethnic specific social justice to correct the historical imbalance of the last three and a half decades. Southeast Asian refugees and their American children are at a disadvantage—educationally, economically, and politically. To continue to ignore their actual needs, even if unwillingly, in favor of a pan-Asian American identity, benefits the first wave of Asian American immigrants and their descendents, at the expense of Southeast Asian American refugees and the generation that is growing up in America.

Not fully Chinese, Vietnamese, or American, Chinese-Vietnamese refugees and their children are placed outside these communities, yet they straddle them all simultaneously. For this very reason, future research on Chinese-Vietnamese refugees and their children may reveal aspects of community, ethnic, identity, and cultural formations in Asian America that has not been documented and, further, confirm that identity (e.g. Vietnamese, Chinese, and American) is already shifting and always situational.

Notes

1 Ethnic Chinese immigration to the US may be distinguished in three stages: (1) 1840 to 1965; (2) post-1965; and (3) post-1975.
2 In the two years after the communist victory, relatively few people escaped Vietnam, because the new authorities announced that certain groups of people (e.g. elected officials, employees of various counterinsurgency, religious leaders, intellectuals, military officers, the middle class, and ethnic Chinese Vietnamese) would be taken to 're-education camps' located at 'New Economic Zones'. They were forced to till uncultivated land and admit to crimes against the new communist state. In light of these punitive measures, middle-class people and merchants, both ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese, began to escape by sea. At first, the American public did not hear much news about them because their numbers were small. The country of first asylum also wanted to keep the arrival of these 'boat people' as quiet as possible because they feared a larger exodus and influx if people in Vietnam learned that their compatriots managed to successfully seek refuge (Chen 2006: 65).
3 The Public Law 93-143 allowed refugees to change their status from 'parolees' to 'permanent resident' because it was apparent that they would not be able to return to their home countries.

Bibliography

11 Dark tourism, diasporic memory and disappeared history
The contested meanings of the former Indochinese refugee camp at Pulau Galang

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Pulau Galang is a 16 km² island in Indonesia’s Riau archipelago, lying just south of Batam. From 1975 to 1996, Galang was a refugee camp administered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Indonesian military that housed Indochinese boat people who had landed in Indonesia. Some 145,000 refugees passed through Galang on their way to resettlement in third countries and, for a few thousand, repatriation to Vietnam.1 While the jungle has reclaimed parts of the former camp, large sections of it, including the places of worship, cemetery and administration buildings, have been maintained or restored. With the addition of a small amount of curating by its Indochinese caretakers, Pulau Galang has effectively become a museum of the Indochinese boat people crisis. The camp has now become something of a pilgrimage site for former internees and their children, and also attracts tourists, especially from Singapore. Every weekend some 100 to 200 people sign the guestbook, and caretakers report a monthly average of some 1200 visitors (Fadli 2009a).

In March 2005, 150 Vietnamese refugees from Australia, the United States and elsewhere returned to Pulau Galang and Pulau Bidong (in Malaysia) to erect memorials to those who died in the exodus from Vietnam after 1975. After complaints from the Vietnamese government, Jakarta agreed to destroy the monument on Pulau Galang, to the consternation of the Vietnamese refugee community worldwide. More recently, Hanoi has put further pressure on Jakarta to close the camp to visitors entirely, presumably because it supports a version of the history of the Vietnam conflict and its aftermath that the government finds objectionable. Overseas Vietnamese organisations accuse Hanoi of attempting to ‘erase history’, while the Batam Industrial Development Authority (BIDA), which manages the site, is unhappy at the potential loss of an important tourist site on the economically troubled islands.

This humble island now finds itself at the center of a conflict over the interpretation of an important slice of twentieth century history. The three main interested parties in the argument, we will argue below, project fundamentally different meanings onto the site of the former refugee camp. For Vietnamese refugee visitors, the island is a shrine containing personal and familial significance, most especially those who left family members and loved ones in the disturbingly large cemetery there. For overseas Vietnamese refugee organizations,