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You cross the river

The depth of sacrifice each refugee makes for the generation that follows

By Georgina Quach



Vietnamese refugees on the Goleo, South China Sea, 1982|© Michel Setboun/Getty Images

In Vietnam, secrets are woven through the geography. They live in the rice fields and run deep in the Củ Chi tunnels, an underground network built by the Viet Cong, extending for miles beneath the south-eastern region of the country. They continue on through the marshes of the Mekong delta, and are hidden away in the fishing boats, which conveyed over 800,000 post-war Vietnamese refugees – “boat people” – to safer lands.

My family owes our survival to one of these rickety barges. In 1979, my grandparents and their eight children were forced from their home in Saigon, which had fallen to the North Vietnamese communists and been renamed Ho Chi Minh City. Everything was seized. Their relatively comfortable lives were shattered. With the threat of persecution and incarceration in one of the brutal “re-education” camps, the stormy seas seemed safer than staying on land.

Amid the desperation of those fleeing Saigon, and tanks rumbling in the streets, it was difficult to make any kind of decision, let alone one that would upend your world forever. At the time, my aunt Kim had just been born. Fearing that she would not survive the treacherous crossing to Hong Kong, my grandfather agonized over whether to leave her behind or to take everyone.

Drowning, starvation and pirates were among the many dangers. “You couldn’t buy a lot of petrol or food because then the government would find out that you were trying to escape”, explained my uncle Phước. “Running out of stocks at sea meant you were stuck.”

In the end, my grandfather decided that it was better for the fate of the whole family to be tied together – whatever it might be. “If we’re all going to die, it’s better we all go down together”, he insisted. So they paid the hefty fee of twelve gold pieces per person – each piece worth around 600 USD today – to escape on a cramped freighter called Huey Fong. This was a crushing sum for my mum’s family. Meanwhile, my dad’s family didn’t have the funds in 1979 and had to wait two years to leave. “If I die, I want you to eat my flesh”, my maternal grandad told his starving children onboard – which was not entirely a joke, my uncle tells me. On arrival in Hong Kong, they were met with a hurricane. My family were lucky. They were rescued and stayed at a camp funded by the UN Refugee Agency, before travelling to England.

Even though I was born in the UK, the memory of that love – expressed in acts of sacrifice – has settled deep in my bones. I belong to the same line as the people who arrived here with nothing but their stories. I grew up with those emotions, intimacies and the turmoil of doubleness – of being poised between two polarized cultures. My family’s memories of this tumultuous period trickled down to me over the years, but always in hazy fragments, as though reliving the whole narrative would repeat its devastation. Some Vietnamese people are so traumatized that their memories have transformed into resentment against their nation of origin. Yet as I grew older, and more aware of how I was different to other children, I started to ask more questions. I’d sit and listen while my mum was washing the dishes. Piecing together their story has helped me grasp the sacrifices that my family made in order to secure safety and hope for me and my generation.

“There’s an old Chinese saying”, my uncle said, “you cross the river by using your feet to feel the stones”. My family were part of a generation that blindly crossed to an unfamiliar territory, unable to speak the language and unprepared for the culture shock. The river must have felt very fast-flowing. But the first boat people embraced the challenge in remarkable ways; they demonstrated to other displaced Vietnamese people – and their adopted countries – that it was possible to flourish in their new societies. Like her five siblings before her, my aunt Kim graduated from university. She forged a successful career in investment banking and pays her additional-rate income tax proudly, seeing it as a way to give back to the country that helped her family.

Exceptional successes are all the more striking because they rebut the cliché of the quiet Vietnamese – reluctant to draw attention to themselves or make too much noise. Such an image exists in mainstream entertainment (the films in which Vietnam is merely the backdrop to an exotic Western story, or a landscape forever marred by war) but it is also prevalent within the Vietnamese community itself. The invisibility of Vietnamese can be traced back to the beginning; the boat people were resettled here quietly. When boatloads of destitute Vietnamese people arrived on Britain’s shores in 1979, Margaret Thatcher tried to muffle their presence. As documents in the National Archives show, the Prime Minister initially attempted to refuse entry to Britain’s UN quota of 10,000 Vietnamese refugees, arguing “that she had far less objection to refugees, such as Rhodesians, Poles and Hungarians, since they could more easily be assimilated into British society”. Even after finally accepting them, the government’s controversial “dispersal policy” ensured that there weren’t more than a handful of families in each town. The

government wanted to prevent ethnic enclaves emerging, which might hinder successful integration. “We were made invisible”, said uncle Phước.



The author’s grandparents with her aunt Chau | © Georgina Quach

Settling Vietnamese people in small groups only worsened their employment prospects. It was also lonely for the older generation, many of whom were still processing a massacre and grieving their losses. Post-traumatic stress disorder is common among boat people. While some are haunted by ghosts of the past, some are haunted by the living. My uncle remembers meeting a victim of pirates, who were responsible for capturing, raping and killing thousands of boat people. She had been dragged on to their ship and raped over three days, before being thrown overboard.

This hidden impact on refugees’ mental health is brought to light in Rachel Nguyen’s documentary *Whatever Happened to the Boat People*, the powerful final episode of the BBC Four series *A Very British History* – an exploration of migration to Britain in the twentieth century. The documentary reveals a harrowing vision of the tragedies of wartime and the different experiences that Nguyen’s family faced when they arrived in Britain during the 1970s and 80s. As a therapist specializing in trauma, Nguyen brought a necessary sensitivity to the lifelong burden of surviving such violence and upheaval. Her path of discovery converged with mine, and we met soon after the programme was broadcast earlier this month. “I’m still processing everything that we discussed”, said Nguyen, months after the episode was made, wishing that she could have fit more into the fifty-nine minutes. Rachel and I were connected by our desire to regain the emotions locked within our mother tongue and culture – before we become entirely Westernized. Due to the language barrier and the mental health stigma that was especially pronounced within ethnic minority communities, there was really no safe space for the newcomers to speak out about their internal battles. “It just wasn’t a thing people thought to address”, Nguyen adds. “Mental health is still a no-go for the older generation [of Vietnamese refugees]”. Though Nguyen sees the benefits of modern counselling as part of her profession, she

was afraid of bringing this up directly with her family. She feared alienating her parents and “coming across as speaking up to her elders. There’s a hierarchy [within the family] ... They want to fall back on spirituality and prayer”.

The biggest sacrifice our families made is neither obvious nor physical. It became apparent only years after their arrival in the UK, as the older generation had to watch their children and grandchildren – second generation immigrants – grow up to become more British and less Vietnamese. When my grandparents decided to flee their home, what they longed for was a better life for future generations. Yet in prioritizing the success of their children and grandchildren they were forced to give up their own opportunities. “They became redundant, kind of unexpectedly”, agreed Nguyen. Unlike me, that first generation could not receive an education or easily build careers in their adopted countries; as a result, they must have keenly felt the absence of their communities and a sense of cultural belonging. The majority of this older generation retired in their 40s. I don’t think they were quite prepared for the loneliness that migration would create for them. My grandparents know only very basic English. Now, I speak hardly any Vietnamese. My generation, especially those living away from our parents, need to work hard to retain our mother tongue and the everyday intricacies of Vietnamese culture. Every time I left university – with Oxford’s quirky, distinctive traditions – and moved home for the holidays, it felt like leaving a compartment of my life that my parents couldn’t relate to. Though we rarely hear about this by-product of assimilating into a new culture, I have grown to understand, over time, that my family’s leap into the unknown in 1979 was one that would create a gulf between generations.

Yet I will always be connected to this history, and to the memories. The depth of my own family’s sacrifice is a reminder that each family that leaves its country of origin to seek safety in another must have its rights protected. “I’m very happy to have come to England. People helped us so much”, said my grandma, forty years after escaping tyranny. Crossing the river by feeling the stones, my family paved new paths for successive generations, even if each generation is a little further from that original sacrifice, a little more removed from the country that was once home. By lumping them together as anonymous “boat people”, we erase the wild imagination and power that were required to make that crossing.

Georgina Quach is a British-Vietnamese journalist whose writing has appeared in the Guardian, the Telegraph and Line of Best Fit. She is currently working to archive and share her community’s “boat people” story.