

## **For Vietnamese-Americans, rising anti-Asian violence leaves them preferring the country their parents fled, for now**

- The Covid-19 pandemic and hate crimes like the Atlanta shootings have left Americans of Vietnamese heritage questioning the country that offered their families refuge
- While the US was seen as a land of opportunity, many migrants experienced discrimination and some of their offspring feel safer in Vietnam

### **Sen Nguyen**

Six years ago, Christina Bui, who was born in the US state of Virginia to a family of Vietnamese immigrants, accepted a job in Ho Chi Minh City. Her mother was appalled.

“My dad was ‘whatever’ [about it] but my mom was furious, giving me the whole ‘I came to America to give you a better life!’ speech,” the 28-year-old recalled about her move to the city also known as Saigon.

But amid recent incidents of violence against Asians and African Americans, the Trump administration’s mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic and the violent mob attack on Capitol Hill in January, Bui is among the Vietnamese-Americans who are mulling over their feelings about the country that once offered their families refuge from war and poverty.

The United States has long been seen by migrants as a land of better opportunities, including the 123,000 Vietnamese who fled Saigon in the years after it fell to North Vietnamese troops in 1975. Five years later, the Refugee Act resulted in over 1.1 million Southeast Asian refugees, including those from Laos and Cambodia, resettling in the US.

But for Bui, whose work at a non-profit foundation focuses on anti-human trafficking efforts, Vietnam’s proactive approach to the coronavirus is one reason for it being a safer place to call home, for now at least. Vietnam has had 2,500 cases and 35 deaths among its 97 million population compared to America’s 30.2 million cases and nearly 549,000 deaths among its 330 million population.

“It’s just weird to me that I feel safer here in the country that my parents fled, than I probably would back home in the US, because of the pandemic, and also because I don’t have to think about blending in or the colour of my skin and therefore I’m not treated outrageously different,” said Bui, whose father and aunt fled Vietnam by boat around 1975 while her maternal grandfather left in 1981 before bringing over other family members, including her mother, by the mid-1980s.

Jenni Trang Le, a Vietnamese-American whose parents fled Saigon by plane, said she felt a sense of “survival guilt” for living in Ho Chi Minh City and not being part of the trauma of the pandemic and rising anti-Asian discrimination her family and friends were experiencing in the US.

“When I try to explain [anti-Asian sentiment] to Vietnamese people, they can understand it intellectually, not emotionally, because they have not experienced it,” said the head producer at a regional entertainment company.

## **ANTI-ASIAN LEGACY**

Hate crimes against Asians regardless of their origin have soared over the past year and while rights advocates say this stems from a long history of discrimination, recent incidents including shooting sprees and physical attacks have been fuelled by Asian-Americans being linked to Covid-19, which was first identified in the central Chinese city of Wuhan. Women have been disproportionately affected, according to a report released earlier this month by Stop AAPI Hate, a coalition that tracks anti-Asian violence since the onset of the pandemic.

A study published last July in the *Ethnic and Racial Studies* journal showed white Christian nationalism was the leading ideology that shaped racist and xenophobic views around the Covid-19 crisis.

Yen Le Espiritu, a professor of ethnic studies at the University of California San Diego, said Asian-Americans had been “racialised in the US as the perpetual foreigner and as the model minority”.

Thus, Asian-Americans felt that no matter how assimilated they were, they would always be perceived as “tangential to US history, and as foreign, not American”, a reality that manifested itself in questions about their nationality and ability to speak English.

As Asians were also seen as a model minority – a stereotype portraying them as intelligent, hardworking and prosperous that emerged in the 1960s to pit them against African-Americans protesting against racial injustice – they were “invisible in discussions on race/racism” compared to the black community, Espiritu said. But Asian-Americans were also especially vulnerable to both verbal and physical racial attacks from both whites and from other communities of colour, she added.

John Vu, a Vietnamese-Chinese-American, said his father, who fled by boat in 1979 and had not been back to Vietnam since, believes in the model minority stereotype, and compares the success of Asian-Americans with other minorities in the US. “He believes working hard will create equality and the American dream.”

His mother, who fled by boat three years later amid rising anti-Chinese sentiment due to the border war between Vietnam and China at the time, had only returned once in 1993.

After Vu moved from California to Saigon in 2019 to contribute to his motherland and better understand its language and culture, they have become more curious about Vietnam.

“When I came home [to the US] for Christmas in 2019, my dad during dinner said for the first time that he wanted to go to Vietnam and visit me. Before that, he would always say ‘later’ when I asked him”, said the 29-year-old employee at a US company which specialises in global supply chain transparency.

## **A REAL CHANGE?**

Mytoan Nguyen-Akbar, who conducted studies on Vietnamese-Americans migrating to Vietnam more than a decade ago as a sociologist at the University of Washington, said one reason for

people returning was to escape the push factors in the US at the time, including the financial recession and “gendered racialisation”.

Asian-American women in the US faced discrimination not only because of their race but also their gender. There was also class discrimination towards low-wage Asian-American immigrant communities. However, living in Vietnam might not necessarily be the solution for Vietnamese-American women, she said.

“Many of the challenges they thought they had escaped from that propelled them to leave the US are still ever present – white expats are still drawing the attention of locals and are the face of locally based companies, although increasingly, we see Vietnamese-American women, and Vietnamese-Australians or Canadians also occupy senior corporate, NGO, and diplomatic postings,” said Seattle-based Nguyen-Akbar, stressing her views do not represent those of her current employer, a municipal government.

The academic explained that the numerous challenges in the US starting last year had made the lure of staying in Vietnam even more attractive.

For others like Dinh Q. Le, an internationally-renowned artist, Vietnam offered his 87-year-old mother a shot at a longer life. He brought her to live with him in Ho Chi Minh City in 2019 after his siblings could no longer take care of her and were thinking about putting her in a care facility, which would have been in southern California.

“We are very lucky to have her here,” said Le. Nursing home residents and employees were among the hardest hit by Covid-19 in the US, accounting for more than a third of all coronavirus deaths as of late February.

Le, 53, fled with his family from the Mekong Delta by boat when he was 10. He resettled in Vietnam in 1997, which he said grants him an emotional detachment to look at the US critically. He lost his uncle and another relative in the US to the virus.

When asked for his thoughts about the current situation in the US, the artist referred to a raccoon, which was found in a refrigerated container sent from the US to Vietnam last October and dubbed a “migrant” by local news outlets.

“I see that raccoon as an analogy of America in distress under the Trump administration and the raccoon has to escape to Vietnam,” he chuckled.

But not all hope is lost. Bui from Virginia said despite the rise in hate crimes, including the six Asian women killed in a shooting in Atlanta earlier this month, she believed things could change, pointing to how people were speaking out against the attacks. Indeed, there has been increased activism from Asian-Americans and support for their calls for greater political representation and more awareness of the community’s contribution to the US, among other things.

“It may seem hopeless to some but there will always be people out there fighting for change, and that’s what gives me hope about America. For every terrible story that comes out of America, there are good ones that counteract them,” Bui said.