

## VỀ VỚI GIA ĐÌNH / Coming Home

ALEX NGUYEN



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*WRITER'S COMMENT: Anyone who meets my grandmother makes it their goal to make her laugh, because when she laughs, you laugh, too. This is the way she raised me: I was to study hard, be consistent in my morals, and laugh abundantly. Bà nội doesn't speak much about the Vietnam War, amidst the backdrop in which she struggled to raise her four children. For reasons of survival, she and the rest of my family put their harrowing past behind them and kept looking forward. It wasn't until I took HIS 179 with Dr. Cecelia Tsu that I was able to gain a holistic perspective on the war, something ubiquitous to my family's stories yet difficult to directly examine. In the desire to learn more about my family's personal history with it, I decided to interview my grandma for the biographical essay we were assigned. Through it, I stumbled upon a narrative that was as familiar to me as the foods she cooks, the stories she tells: one in which she and the family she built, in the face of immense hardship, persisted in their laughter. Bà nội did not raise me to grieve. This is our history from the perspective of joy.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: When I first read Alex's writing early on in the quarter in HIS 179, I recognized right away that she was an enormously gifted writer, adept at narrating stories that mattered. For our term paper assignment, Alex chose the option to write a biographical account of an Asian American subject based on a series of oral history interviews. After speaking to several members of her family, she asked if she could focus on more than one individual. It did not surprise me when she produced a beautifully written paper that engagingly captured her paternal grandparents' upbringing in Vietnam during wartime, internal migration from North to South Vietnam, forced displacement, and eventual migration to the United States. I had known of Alex's admiration and deep affection for*

*her grandfather, who passed away in 2015, and her paper was a moving tribute to him. A multilingual, college-educated intellectual trained in philosophy, literature, and language, her grandfather taught and mentored high school students in South Vietnam while the war loomed; a number of the boys in his classes had fathers in the military and became soldiers themselves. Alex's grandmother, who she describes as an upbeat, pragmatic, resourceful woman, met the challenges of famine, poverty, and life under Communism with characteristic good humor and generosity. It's not hard to see many of their traits passed down to their American-born granddaughter. In Alex's piece, the history of war, displacement, and migration is told through the lives of these remarkable individuals, and her fluid, powerful prose illuminates their spirit and resilience, a journey into the past that fills the soul in the present.*

—Cecilia Tsu, Department of History

**M**y paternal grandmother, my bà nội, Phan Thị Thu, was born in Nam Định in the north of Vietnam on September 14, 1940. She was born the last child of six children, younger than her siblings by several years. Her father, Phan Đình Lan, was the manager of an electrical appliances store, and her mother, Phạm Thị Nhân, also sold items while caring for the children. When asked about their characters, she responded that they were regular people who lived long lives and first and foremost looked after their families.<sup>1</sup> This seemingly simple strength and nobility became more vital than ever when the Viet Minh took over Hanoi and the rest of North Vietnam in 1954 after their victory at Điện Biên Phủ, and the family was cautioned to flee by neighbors who had begun to recognize the advent of war.<sup>2</sup> At 14, my grandmother and her family fled to Sài Gòn, abandoning their home, their business, and all the goods they could not carry. Her uncle stayed behind to look after the store, refusing to give up their property to the new government. As the story goes, he was brought into the jungle by a group of soldiers and he was never heard from again.<sup>3</sup> The move effectively scattered my grandmother's family and belongings, but the core of her family, her parents and her siblings, remained tightly knit. As such, they were able to rebuild their lives in the South and to keep moving.<sup>4</sup>

My grandmother, who biked to school as a youth, was well educated; she excelled in mathematics. From a young age, she was known to have had a good humor, and an indulgent nature. When her older brother,

who was known for being a rather timid and gentle spirit, fancied a girl in her class, he enlisted her in biking beside the girl and starting a conversation so that he could join in, rather than initiate it himself.<sup>5</sup>

This same brother had two schoolmates he considered to be his closest friends. One of them was Nguyễn Hữu Khánh. He and my grandmother were married on December 25, 1964.<sup>6</sup>

My ông nội, my paternal grandfather, was born in Hà Nội on September 2, 1939. He was also the youngest of six children—he had four sisters and a brother. His father had been an official in the village administration, but had died when my grandfather was about a year old, leaving my great grandmother to manage a massive farm as well as raise their children by herself. She grew a variety of crops, including rice and corn. To help with the expanse of responsibilities this created, she hired laborers but worked alongside them, talking with them and paying them well. They had also fled to Sài Gòn in the south following the Viet Minh takeover of 1954, and remained loyal to the South Vietnamese government there.<sup>7</sup>

When a civil war was declared on South Vietnam by the North in 1959, his brother enlisted in the South Vietnamese army and was trained to fly helicopters.<sup>8</sup> My grandfather considered doing the same, but asked his mother for advice before making a decision. Not wanting both of her sons to fight in the war, she advised him to become a teacher, the other most viable option for educated youths at the time. He went to college to train in philosophy, literature, and language—Vietnamese, English, French, and Latin.<sup>9</sup>

A year after he married my grandmother there, she gave birth to my father, Nguyễn Hữu Dũng on May 5, 1966. Another son followed the year after, a third in 1972, and a fourth in 1973. As it was, my father and his brothers were incredibly young during the peak of the war. My grandfather, who was a teacher at the time, was obligated by his occupation to travel across South Vietnam; thus they were able to keep away from most of the fighting.<sup>10</sup>

They moved to Vũng Tàu as a family in 1971, which at that point had been a small beachfront village of no more than 20 houses. My father recounts this as being the most beautiful time of his childhood. My grandfather was able to find a job as the principal of a newly opened high school there and became very involved in village matters early on, working and socializing nearly all day while my grandmother stayed at

home to look after their children. Grandpa had spoken several times to the mayor of the village and had struck up a friendship with the man, who told him at one point that whenever he felt weary or dismayed, he would visit my grandfather in his office at the school. He would be invited to sit down, and they would talk about anything at all while watching the ocean calmly rise against the shore. Afterwards, everything would be alright again.<sup>11</sup>

As the war progressed, my grandfather told this man about his feeling unsafe due to the threat of war and hysteria-inspired crimes, particularly because he and his wife had four children to look after now. While citizens at the time were mostly banned from carrying arms, the mayor, who trusted in my grandfather's character and understood his fear, allowed him to take a rifle and some ammunition. He never used it, but kept it in one corner of the house and left the bullets in a safebox away from the reach of the children. It would serve as a reminder to my father that, though he and his brothers were raised far away from the war, not everything was at peace. Nightly, my father would also see the beacon shot into the sky by the South Vietnamese army patrol, which would light up the surrounding area for brief moments before falling once more to darkness. At one point, a South Vietnamese troop marching nearby knocked on my family's door asking for water. My grandmother bade them to sit down. She gave them the water they asked for and then she cooked for them, and they spoke with her for a short while before thanking her and leaving. Recounting it now, my father remembers them as having been kind and well mannered.<sup>12</sup>

They moved again to Sài Gòn in 1974 when my father was eight years old. My grandfather was trained in military style along with all the other teachers following an order by the president of South Vietnam that required all able-bodied citizens to be prepared for war. At this point, my grandfather was teaching at a special school for boys whose fathers had either died in battle or were on active duty far away. Most of these boys became soldiers, as they also received military training at the academy, ensuring that their fathers remained in their lives.<sup>13</sup> No matter where my grandfather went, in treating his students with reason and care, he was valued and well remembered. Even decades after the war, and even after immigrating to America, his students would still call him and write to him for advice, for old time's sake, or simply because their bond had become so strong.

The war ended when Sài Gòn fell to the North Vietnamese on April 30, 1975.<sup>14</sup> My mother, living in the same city, had been eight, and remembers hiding under the kitchen sink as bombs and bullets flew overhead. The day after, my father and his friends went onto the streets to find it littered with unused grenades, guns, belts of ammunition, and South Vietnamese army uniforms. Some of his friends, all of them around nine years old, collected these shiny toys to help make believe they had been a part of the war effort. My father never spared them more than a glance: his parents were both no-nonsense people, and he would never have gotten away with it if he'd joined in the collecting.<sup>15</sup>

After the war, my grandfather's brother, who had fought in the defeated army, was imprisoned in a concentration camp for seven years.<sup>16</sup> The Viet Minh government called them reeducation camps.<sup>17</sup> They continued this reeducation in their social policies as well, ensuring the death of remembrance—my grandfather used to show me old pictures of him standing beside a South Vietnamese flag which, in the years following the war, he had been made to blot out with permanent marker.

My grandparents were relocated, and for them, it was at least the second time they had been forcibly relocated due to the communist threat. My grandmother and her family were scattered once again across South Vietnam. My grandfather, who had previously been a principal, was relegated to being a simple high school teacher, no longer allowed to teach certain things as Plato or Aristotle.<sup>18</sup> As part of the reforms under the new government, he was paid for his job in rations of rice and grains, as other citizens were.<sup>19</sup>

But for my father and his brothers, life went on. Being children, their losses never registered as losses, but as brand new experiences. My grandparents always made the best of what they had, but they were also quick thinkers and decisive people. There was no situation they could not work around, and they never showed any fear or upset around the children. In their minds, there was only the careful raising of their children, and the moving forward. When my grandmother received government rations of noodles, she boiled them in the place of the rotting and dirty rice they were usually given in hopes of making a better meal for my father and his brothers. To her and the boys' surprise, the noodles disintegrated entirely and turned to powder in the hot water. The potatoes they were given were also rotting and unsafe to eat. Resolved to make a decent meal for her family, my grandma took the rice she'd

cooked and pounded it tightly into balls capable of being easily picked up and dipped into a topping she made of salt, sesame seeds, peanuts, or shavings of old coconuts. Normally, this dish would be served with *ruốc*, or pork floss, but meat was rationed so that for ten years, it was only ever available to them on Tết, the Lunar New Year. Rather than bemoaning this, the children looked forward to Tết every year as a day of immense luxury, as it was only on that day that they were able to buy new clothes and shoes with money the family had saved up over the course of the year. Whenever they were able to purchase white rice as opposed to the impure rice they were rationed, my uncle would run around shouting for joy.<sup>20</sup>

They found other sources of joy in playing with the children their age who were also shielded from the worst of the era—soccer in their neighborhood was played with a single ball shared by the children of that community.<sup>21</sup> When one member of their coterie kicked the ball into the house of a man rumored to be a communist, not a single player wanted to go fetch it. My third uncle went first, and didn't come back out for a long while. My fourth uncle went after him to see what he was taking so long, and he didn't reappear soon after, either. It was only when my grandpa came home from work that they discovered the neighbor keeping the boys and their ball locked in his house as punishment for trespassing. My grandpa only had to speak to him a little while to take his sons back home. My grandma laughed when she told me of how frightened they looked afterwards, and how my uncle had wet himself during the ordeal.<sup>22</sup>

My grandparents treated their children with the same generosity and good humor as they treated all other people. They never allowed them to be burdened by fear or worry, and instead imposed on them the fear of doing poorly in school, or of having their actions reflect poorly on their family. They went to school every day with neatly combed hair, clean hands and faces, and ironed shirts tucked into their pants.<sup>23</sup>

The family decided to immigrate to America in 1980 after five years of living in poverty.<sup>24</sup> The famine and flood of 1979 leading to a cutting down of the rice ration to four kilograms a month no doubt played a role in that decision.<sup>25</sup> They applied to be sponsored by my grandmother's brother—the same brother who had been my grandfather's closest friend throughout middle and high school—who was currently living in Minnesota. He had immigrated much earlier, having found a job there

helping newly arrived immigrants adapt to life in the United States. Moving would mean once more abandoning their home and relatives and selling any items they would not be able to bring along with them. This time, however, they would be prepared. This time, it would be their choice.<sup>26</sup> The sponsorship process took nine years to authorize, and they flew to the United States in 1989 and settled in San Rafael, California with my grandmother's other brother. Her brother (the one who had been living in Minnesota) had died in a car accident just before.<sup>27</sup>

As immigrants, they returned to poverty, now coupled with the burden of being deemed unqualified for the jobs they previously held in Vietnam. My grandfather, who had had such an illustrious repertoire of education, had to take up a job at Payless Shoes with my father for six months before they were able to find jobs at a factory. Lacking the funds to buy a car, they were forced to walk two miles to and from work each day, where the pay would only have been a few hundred dollars a month. Regardless, they were immensely relieved to have it. Even though my grandmother found this life lacking, she nonetheless found it better than their life in Vietnam. In America, she says, they were afforded social and economic mobility, and they were willing to work for it. Every struggle was a new experience, for she was afforded new freedoms—for instance, she was able to walk the streets without the fear of being kidnapped or taken away and imprisoned for something she didn't do. She no longer had to inform friends and family of her location and intentions at every moment for fear of going missing. She was able to send all of her sons to Mission College eventually with the help of financial aid, and my father and uncles worked just as hard at school as their parents did at their occupations. To help support them, my grandmother took to baking goods like sesame balls to sell in the Vietnamese markets. Within a Vietnamese community composed mostly of refugees like themselves, surrounded by people who were willing to do them plenty of favors and regard them as long-lost family, they were never afraid of being discriminated against or socially isolated.<sup>28</sup>

My mother, Nguyễn Quỳnh Dao, immigrated to Toronto, Canada in 1990. Her father, Nguyễn Văn Vũ, was a college classmate of my ông nội in Sài Gòn, and their families were acquaintances for some time. Landing in Toronto, she says, was like arriving in heaven, being freed at last in a country of opportunity. She landed a job working as a cook in the CN Tower after another Vietnamese immigrant, Mrs. Châu, noticed

her being interviewed and spoke to the managers on her behalf, ensuring them that once my mother was on board, she would take full responsibility for her. She kept her promise after they hired my mom, teaching her the English names of every vegetable, spice, and other ingredients at their disposal, as well as all the Western social customs she'd need to know to be successful in any workplace.<sup>29</sup> Nowadays, we consider Mrs. Châu a part of the family.

When my parents were married on July 4, 1998, they had a wedding in Toronto and a wedding in San Jose, where the family had moved to from San Rafael once they were able to get a car and better financial prospects. The reception party completely filled the small two bedroom apartment they were renting in San Jose, and in Toronto, the small house my maternal family had bought. From the front porch to the backyard, relatives had flown in from all over North America to celebrate the occasion. More importantly, they also invited every person they had come to know over their years of struggle—like Mrs. Châu, my grandfather's old students, my dad's coworkers at his first software engineering job, his old community college professors, even the Italian priest who had officiated their marriage. My grandma wore a mauve áo dài, my grandpa his characteristic grey suit. After many years of building their lives, they were finally afforded a grand celebration, and a new beginning.<sup>30</sup>

When I asked my grandmother for the most important life lesson she could teach me, she smiled and told me, “Chống cộng.” Just don't be a communist. But she elaborated—the greatest joy that she has found in America has been to be able to be independent, and to not have to live in fear of once more being separated from her home, her belongings, or her family.<sup>31</sup>

When I asked my father the same question, he told me another story.

Back when my youngest uncle was studying at Davis, my father drove my grandparents up from San Jose in order to pick up my uncle on the weekend. When leaving, however, the car broke down—my father, in his 20s, tended to drive at maniacal speeds. There was smoke under the hood, and they had to stop to let the engine cool down, stopping and starting, and stopping again. They made it to a gas station, asking around for a mechanic, but they were told that since it was Sunday, the shop was closed. A man, who to them seemed rather tall and imposing, was filling up his own gas when he overheard. He said he wanted to help. He

led them through town, down unfamiliar roads, and everyone was quiet and afraid. They stopped by a couple places with no luck—these, too, were closed for the day. The man apologized and offered to follow them in his car until they got home, so that, should the car give up the ghost, he would still be able to take them the rest of the way. At home, they might then call someone for help. They thanked him and kept driving, and he followed them from Davis all the way to Milpitas, just to make sure things ended up alright. When, by some miracle, they made it to their destination, my grandfather left the car to greet the man, to thank him, and to say goodbye. He took out some money and asked him to please take it in thanks for his incredible generosity. The man refused, only assenting when my grandfather insisted he should at least take it as gas money. He would have a long journey to make, after all, driving all the way back. My father's lesson: "If you believe there are good people still around, you will find them. You have to trust people. There are good things still around."<sup>32</sup>

When asked about their national identity, my family members all replied the same way.

They are not Asian American. "American" was a label that they took up as a result of being citizens of this country, but they are Asian in culture, in practice, in belief, and at heart.<sup>33</sup> They are Vietnamese—not Vietnamese Americans, but Vietnamese people displaced. My grandmother, having been forcibly uprooted several times, has many homes left behind in Vietnam now. My grandfather, who passed in July of 2015, told me before he died of his desire to have his ashes scattered in the Pacific Ocean so that he might one day find his way back home. His book, written in his retirement, of which he printed a few hundreds of copies to give to libraries, friends, and relatives, is entitled *Về Đâu?* (*Where Does One Return To?*)

The immigration of Vietnamese refugees, as well as the immigration of many other Asian Americans, tends to leave behind a trail of strings attached to people's home countries, and this is all the more difficult to resolve in cases of forced removal. Constant movement, even if it is forward, leaves many things in the past unresolved, and creates ghosts.

Growing up as the child of immigrants displaced by war and famine, I grew up around many ghost stories. My grandfather told me he had heard the phantom footsteps of soldiers marching up and down the staircase of their apartment in Sài Gòn, forever unaware of the end

of their service. My “uncle,” who taught me to drive, lived in Ban Mê Thuột, the site of a large and terrible battle in the Vietnam War with over 5,000 casualties.<sup>34</sup> There were footsteps almost every night on the roof of his family’s house, and late one night, he had seen the specter of a young man run into their house and disappear into the kitchen wall. According to Heonik Kwon, author of *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*, ghosts in Vietnamese culture are treated as “uncles and aunts.” A living person would speak of a ghost to whom they have no relation, just as one refugee might address another. Ghosts, although wandering, are forever in our periphery as Vietnamese people.<sup>35</sup> Though we may have been separated from them by death (like my grandfather), though they might have gone missing (like my grandmother’s uncle), or simply if we haven’t seen them in a while (like Mrs. Châu and her elderly mother who used to give me sugar cookies and supervise as her great grandson and I fingerpainted), they are still living with us. They are something we can bring along with us when we have been made to leave so many things behind. My grandma, ironically, does not believe in the existence of ghosts. But my father always tells me my grandpa is watching over us and protecting us in whatever we do. Irrespective of our individual religious practices, we all still worship our ancestors.

In a similar way, Vietnamese refugees see Vietnam as a mother from whom they have been separated. The words, “Mẹ Việt Nam ơi, chúng con vẫn còn đây!” (“Oh Mother Vietnam, your children are still here!”) are still sung in South Vietnamese festivals, plays, and other such gatherings. The Vietnamese song “Lòng Mẹ” is so well recognized that its tune alone produces tears among the older Vietnamese generation. Meaning “A Mother’s Heart,” it evokes a child’s grateful grief:

Mother’s love is as vast as the Pacific Ocean . . .  
Loving, she sang pleasant words  
Lulled us to sleep, during her wakeful nights  
For years, her tears flowed like [a] stream  
Into our hearts, her hair already gray.  
Whoever on road, went to somewhere away  
Despite hardship of life journey, high tides  
Sun light may dim but love will never die  
Wish to return to live near mother’s side.<sup>36</sup>

While this is most commonly interpreted as referring to Mother Vietnam,

the song and the sentiments ring true for all of our mothers: my great grandmother, who refused to have both of her sons perish in the army; my bà nội, who hid the effects of poverty from her children by making the best of what little food they had, whose love is always so evident in her cooking; my maternal grandmother, my bà ngoại, who gave my mother a heart-shaped locket before she left to live two thousand miles away from her in California, and who, in Vietnam's post-war era of poverty, made shoes and embroidered clothes to support her family; my own mother, who used to call me every night in my freshman year of college, who asks me still to take the train every Friday to be home with her. Mother Vietnam, to us, is another spirit for the altar, another ghost that we carry, another relative we have been separated from, another home we have left behind.

But with every home my family has left behind, we have created another. Whether in Vũng Tàu, Sài Gòn, San Rafael, Toronto, or San Jose, in how they have treated the people around them and in how they have been treated in return, having made new friends and thus expanding their family, they have made homes in every place they have resided. We have a family scattered across the globe, from my grandfather's students who have immigrated to various states, Canada, and Europe, to the people who have helped my parents in the early years of their immigration whom I now consider aunts and uncles. This is the spirit of Vietnam brought overseas: the scattered children of Mother Vietnam, the Vietnamese diaspora, have in many places formed communities that, in sharing their struggles, joys, and preserving their culture, have become large families building Vietnam in their new situations.

When we moved to Gilroy from San Jose in September of 2018, the first thing we thought of was where we might put our altar. Along with it, we would be bringing the images of my great grandparents—my great grandfather, the business owner, my great grandmother, the keeper of their household, my other great grandfather, the government official, and my great grandmother, the farmer. My grandfather, the lifelong teacher, and my grand uncle, helping hand to countless other immigrants and his best friend, are there as well. Our family, though scattered in life, is united. Our spirits are with us. We are together. We are home.

## Notes

1. Interview with Phan Thị Thu, Gilroy, CA, November 17, 2019.
2. Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012), 617-618.
3. Oral histories by Nguyễn Hữu Dũng, CA, 1999-2019.
4. Interview with Phan Thị Thu.
5. Oral histories by Nguyễn Hữu Dũng.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 618.
9. Oral histories by Nguyễn Hữu Dũng.
10. Interview with Nguyễn Hữu Dũng & Nguyễn Quỳnh Dao, Gilroy, CA, November 17, 2019.
11. Interview with Nguyễn Hữu Dũng & Nguyễn Quỳnh Dao.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Hastings, Max, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2018), 119-120.
15. Interview with Nguyễn Hữu Dũng & Nguyễn Quỳnh Dao.
16. Oral histories by Nguyễn Hữu Dũng.
17. *Report of an Amnesty International Mission to The Socialist Republic of Viet Nam* (London, UK: Amnesty International Publications, 1981), 72.
18. Interview with Phan Thị Thu.
19. Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnam: Neither Peace Nor War* (Pasir Panjang, Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 1979), 4.
20. Interview with Nguyễn Hữu Dũng & Nguyễn Quỳnh Dao.
21. Ibid.
22. Oral histories by Phan Thị Thu, CA, 1999-2019.

23. Interview with Nguyễn Hữu Dũng & Nguyễn Quỳnh Dao.
24. Ibid.
25. Huynh, *Vietnam: Neither Peace Nor War*, 4.
26. Interview with Phan Thị Thu.
27. Interview with Nguyễn Hữu Dũng & Nguyễn Quỳnh Dao.
28. Interview with Phan Thị Thu.
29. Interview with Nguyễn Hữu Dũng & Nguyễn Quỳnh Dao.
30. Nguyễn Home Videos, 1998.
31. Interview with Phan Thị Thu.
32. Interview with Nguyễn Hữu Dũng & Nguyễn Quỳnh Dao.
33. Interviews with Phan Thị Thu and Nguyễn Hữu Dũng & Nguyễn Quỳnh Dao.
34. Pham Ngoc Thach & Ho Khang, *History of the War of Resistance against America* (8th edition) (Hanoi, VN: National Political Publishing House, 2008), 273.
35. Heonik Kwon, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 16.
36. Nguyen, Nhien. "Mother's Love (English Lyrics Of A Vietnamese Song Of Y Vân: Lòng Mẹ)." PoemHunter.com. PoemHunter.com, May 30, 2018. <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/mother-s-love-english-lyrics-of-a-vietnamese-song-of-y-v-n-lo-ng-me-translated-and-composed-by-nhien-nguyen-md/>.