

Unsafe Passage: A Generational Story of Vietnamese “Boat People”

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Background:

Along with thousands of other refugees from the Vietnam conflict, my mother and her family escaped the war by risking their lives seeking passage on rickety, unsafe sea journeys. These refugees were named “Vietnamese Boat People” by the American media of the time. Many people were killed along the way, yet people continued to flee Vietnam. Journeys consisted of weeks and weeks on boats; spending years on refugee camps; fighting against pirates, nausea, hunger, and diseases; losing touch with family members for years on end; and worst of all, no sense of security.

Significance:

Completing this research helped me realize the effects immigration can hold on generations to come. As a child of two immigrant parents, I’ve always felt disconnected from both of my cultures (Chinese and Mexican) and either side of my family. Immigration is not just a time and place; instead, it holds a rippling effect on generations as cultures are distorted and expectations are high.

Research Question:

What drives people to leave their homes and risk everything in search of safety and a perceived better life?

History of the Vietnam War:

The conflict in Vietnam stems to the 1880s when the French took control of Vietnam. First, Ho Chi Minh creates the Indochina Communist Party and eventually revolts against the French. At the time, the U.S. military swore to assist in any way to stop the spread of communism, meaning they fought alongside the French and against Ho Chi Minh. Due to the conflict of the war and the poor idea of life, many families, including my own, tried to escape Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, and his Communist ideals. They left without knowing where to head.

Results:

Political Oppression & Poverty. The fear of political persecution continued to grow amongst Vietnamese living in the South, especially as Ho Chi Minh’s Communist Party grew in power. Southern Vietnamese had their property, wealth, and freedom taken away by the government, leaving everyone to live in poverty.

- “Eventually, communists took over and took everything we had. We were wealthy at the time, so the communists began living in our house and left us with no alternative place to live. They took away everything. All of my dad’s gold. All of my mom’s jewelry – that’s when my dad decided we needed to flee.” - To (Nicole) Vuong, my mother

Escaping torture and “re-education.” Political oppression came in the form of “re-education” camps. South Vietnamese leaders were forced to attend these political prison camps and were indoctrinated to the ideology of the new Communist ideals. Torture was used against the South Vietnamese in these camps.

Continued War. Even though the nation reunified, war continued. Those living in Vietnam could not handle living in turmoil any longer. To make matters worse, in 1979, Vietnam took up arms with the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Thousands of Vietnamese fled the conflict.

Vietnamese with Chinese ancestry were targeted by the government. In 1978, new laws were created that affected people of Chinese descent living in Vietnam, which included my own family. The government could seize Chinese-owned businesses. Those affected wanted to leave the country to seek greater economic and social freedom.