

## Vietnamese America: On 'Good Refugees', Fake News, and Historical Amnesia

*Ben Vo*

### **Abstract**

Vietnamese Americans are at a crossroads: the rise of mainstream misinformation and pro-Trump sentiment in their communities is not a historical aberration, yet attempts to explain it draw exclusively upon the good refugee narrative and fail to interrogate the legacy of imperialism and liberalism that all Americans inherit.

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The day after I saw pictures of participants at a pro-Biden rally that was hosted by the Progressive Vietnamese American Organization (PIVOT) in San Jose, California, the city with the largest population of overseas Vietnamese, a pro-Trump car rally took place in the eastern suburbs where most of the said population is concentrated, apparently in response to the former. Whether it was unintentional or not, or even if it was organized by Vietnamese people, this contempt exchange highlighted to me how the nascent attention surrounding Vietnamese American Trump voters have rendered them hypervisible in the past few years, especially leading up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election and the fracturing impact that it has on family relations between the right and left, old and young, respectively. On the surface, it seems contradictory, and attempts to explain or placate the seemingly unwavering electoral support that he receives usually involve his overt Sinophobia, the intergenerational divide, or online misinformation to attempt to explain why the usually older Vietnamese diaspora electorate swings

right-wing frequently. While those are all correct and that there is grassroots work being done to combat conspiracy theories and far-right YouTube personalities, it's worth asking what is and continues to be occluded from these narratives about China and fake news? The sociopolitical moment that younger Vietnamese Americans find themselves in is not a historical aberration, but rather a misapprehension of their own hyphenated identity and residence in America, starting with their perception of their supposed rescue from postwar poverty and opportunity to pursue the American Dream to the belief of a benevolent U.S. on the international stage. The framing of Vietnamese America as grateful, reformed refugees shows that the construction and weaponization of the good refugee narrative serves to reinforce the historical amnesia that will not adequately solve this dividing issue in Vietnamese families.

During the 1980s, as significant numbers of Vietnamese were being permanently resettled in the U.S. during the second wave of Southeast Asian refugee arrivals, lives were being rebuilt, and in many cases, they were turned into the newest "model minority" (Espiritu, 104), a term that was younger than the cataclysmic Second Indochina War itself. Not only did this framing transform the U.S. from a violent aggressor to a benevolent rescuer in Southeast Asia, but it started to justify the narrative in the American political imagination that the war was good and just, with ample coverage and research of their assimilation and prosperity. Yet, buried within the public recollection of gratitude, freedom, and acculturation in these burgeoning enclaves is the intimidation, silencing, and among many others, the outright assassination of several Vietnamese journalists for their left-leaning views or criticisms of the National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam, known as The Front. Led by Hoang Co Minh, a former South Vietnam military man, the Front assembled a fighting force to overthrow the Hanoi government and liberate their country from the reunified socialist regime. The violent repression

of dissent was not uncommon from the military-junta like Front, scaring people through intimidation, beatings, and mercenaries to prevent deeper inquiry into their lofty mission to reconquer and return to their homeland - tantamount to invading a sovereign country, requiring funding and advanced logistics. Anyone who defied or dug deeper to understand where the funds were allocated or whether they were being extorted faced brutal consequences. Even calling for normalized relations with Vietnam warranted a death threat. No one was ever held responsible, until an investigation was relaunched in 2014 by ProPublica: “The families of the murdered Vietnamese American journalists long ago gave up hope of seeing justice done. They remain disappointed and confused. They expected more of the government they had adopted as their own, excited by its promise of liberty and convinced of its fearlessness in seeking the truth.” (Thomspon, 2015). Many would wonder how refugees who state that they fled an authoritarian regime could end up becoming one, when in reality, they themselves were the regime while they were in power. Even though most of these journalists were staunchly anti-communist, anyone who questioned the Front’s motives or even was labeled as a communist was silenced; its effects are arguably still felt today with the prevalence of right-wing politics, especially within Vietnamese American families. These ideologies, however, did not emerge out of thin air - the 1956 reunification elections could have only been obstructed through huge checks, witch-hunting of anyone remotely left-leaning, and emergency laws by way of sham elections. Police repression and American imperialism served to defend a right-wing clique against the will of the people in South Vietnam (Ivens, 1967).

In her explainer article on Vietnamese American voters preferring Trump, Terry Nguyen writes: “A common joke among young Viet progressives is that you’re bound to be called a communist, or *cộng sản*, once you openly express any left-leaning political views. And yet, I find

that there is something uniquely cruel about this political divide among a war-torn generation and their children” (2020). The divisions still run deep, but more broadly historically reflect how the U.S. immigration system not only favored the arrival of migrants who supported American-led coups, but especially facilitated refugees who had close ties to U.S. foreign policy interests. In 1981 alone, Reagan accepted more than three times the limit of Vietnamese refugees because they served as witnesses and moral narratives of people leaving a communist country, being granted citizenship as racialized people and integrated into the political system based on their contribution to a liberal, capitalist empire. Today, as Trump makes his political opponents out to be his enemies, many older generation Vietnamese Americans similarly are putting disdainful distance between themselves and their children and grandchildren, partly as a survival mechanism as well as the allegiance that they pledged to this country. Consequently, younger Vietnamese Americans outspoken about their social-progressive political affiliations with their families can expect a mix of heated arguments, contempt, and the good refugee narrative.

A cousin of the model minority image, the continued framing of Vietnamese people as good, indebted refugees underscores the hidden cost of assimilation, which is to forget the cost of assimilation. The construction and production of the good refugee was an antidote to Vietnam defeating the U.S and its occupation, and its resulting loss of rescued and liberated people to showcase (Espiritu, 103). Indeed, in the portrayal of “good refugees”, they’re defined in negation to subjugated, wartorn, and embargoed Vietnam, where the denial of freedom and democracy is endemic, where it is only birthed and salient in the United States. In her work on grateful and indebted Vietnamese refugees and the ties to liberal empire—and, Mimi Thi Nguyen analyzes that the levying of debt and gratitude undergirds the violent peace that was left in the wake of freedom’s empire (Nguyen, 31). To receive the gift of freedom then, is to be followed

by debt to the empire. -They live according to certain laws that govern citizenship, but when these promises are broken as it was for many refugees who were resettled, then the “good” refugee must surrender themselves to the master narrative of multicultural liberalism: “That portrayal paints Viet refugees as passive victims with little or no agency who escaped from a heinous society ruled by a vile communist regime and evil authoritarianism. With good intellect and strong work ethics, a good refugee can be assimilated to become a peaceful, law-abiding, hard-working, tax-paying U.S. citizen and attain “the American dream.” A good refugee can even rise to prominent political positions to further racist anti-refugee agendas” (Chau, 2020). Moreover, this reflects the anti-Black and Orientalist undertones of the good refugee, as all of the things that a good refugee can become are what Black people in the United States are *not* in the national culture, yet again defined in negation to. Not unsimilarly, the model minority image sticks a racial wedge and defines what an ideal minority group should resemble by highlighting what it is not - hard-working, self-sufficient, upward-bound. It erases Vietnamese and Asian radicalism and highlights not only the link between anti-communism and white supremacy, but between anti-radicalism and anti-Blackness as well. It’s often overlooked that Martin Luther King Jr. and other Black radical leaders denounced the U.S. for bankrolling a puppet regime during the most prominent years of the civil rights movement. They linked the destinies of Black America and Vietnam with one another and with the anti-colonial, Third World struggles of Africa, Latin America, and Asia. They understood that the imperialist war being waged in Vietnam was one and the same as the one being waged domestically; they knew that resistance in the first world was inexplicably linked to revolution in the third world. Though much time has passed since then, the history of radical Black-Asian internationalism is more relevant than ever. Yet, time and time again, the prevailing discourse surrounding tough conversations that younger

Vietnamese Americans try to have with their conservative elders stress Chau's point about the pressure to be "loyal, patriotic, and to align with the U.S. American neoliberal white supremacist systems continues to persist" (2020).

It's instinctive that Vietnamese Americans would share to their parents what they're learning in Asian American studies courses, except when they only mention Asia as a place that their families left behind to come to America. As Bae and Tseng-Putterman argue on the presumption of how their elders' Asianness stands in opposition to the values of social justice on which Asian *American* solidarity rests for the Black Lives Matter movement, "For instance, the recent "talk to your Asian parents about antiblackness" genre poses second-generation, mostly college-educated Asian Americans as the necessary bridges to shepherd their parents into the milieu of recognizing privilege, unpacking colorism and debunking the model minority myth. Despite their intent, this genre associates Asianness with ignorance and racism and Asian *Americanness* with progressivism and solidarity" (2020). Particularly, Asian American Studies courses teach at great length about the legacy of exclusion and hardships that Asians experienced once they came to America, but more has to be said about Asian histories and cultures that shaped our elders, and as a result, us. This is best exemplified by the anti-Trumpist, American exceptionalist genre of rhetoric: if Trump really were as tough and anti-communist as he claims, then why didn't he serve in the Vietnam War to fight them? Although there is an appeal in this argument, it risks rehabilitating the war as good and virtuous while questioning the morality of those who dodged it. It falls into the good refugee narrative and dismisses analysis of white supremacist and racial capitalist systems that Bae and Tseng-Putterman critique: "Where Asian American allyship is delimited to the same terrain of liberalism and multiculturalism which construct the facade of US post-racialism, a return to internationalism enables a fundamental

critique of Americanness motivated not by charity or empathy, but an analysis of the intertwined systems of antiblackness, Orientalism and global white supremacy.”

Vietnamese American Trump supporters aren't necessarily diametrically opposed to the anti-Trump resistance, but the Vietnamese left: when we were racialized and assimilated into the U.S. and white supremacy we lost touch with our history and seeing ourselves as a part of the Vietnamese revolutionary legacy. The historical amnesia that we're witnessing is not new, yet we must allow ourselves to claim that history, both good and bad, and situate ourselves away from these anti-Black and Orientalist tropes and in relation to the possibilities that would be opened up if we did so. How do we honor the experiences of our family members, while remembering that their perspective is not the authority on history and culture? If it is truly the present that enables us to understand the past, then young, progressive Vietnamese Americans must critically interrogate U.S. intervention in their homeland and reconcile with the history that they were split off from in being represented as citizens in the national culture and memory of America to understand not only why many of their parents voted for Trump and hold anti-Black sentiments, but also why they call for unity, healing, and coming together in this country and refuse to acknowledge a reunified Vietnam that resisted and overcame American imperialism 46 years ago.

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