Involuntary Immigrant: The Story of a Vietnamese Refugee

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Abstract

Hoang Minh Phan never wanted to leave Vietnam. After his father was shot and killed by the Viet Cong, he vowed that he would stay by his mother's side and care for and protect her. However, one fateful morning, Hoang finds himself in a boat with other refugees looking to escape Vietnam. Realizing the situation he was in too late, he journeys to Malaysia, Greece, and finally settled in Texas, where he begins to rebuild his life. This paper explores not only Hoang's story, but the complicated history of many Southeast Asian refugees who escaped Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam after the American Wars in Southeast Asia.

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Hoang Minh Phan was born on January 1st 1960, just five years after the Vietnam War started. His childhood was filled with adversity, poverty, and uncertainty. He died of lung cancer on February 18th, 2004 as a result of smoking since the age of 16, but his story is survived by his wife, Kayley Phan and two children, Anh-Vy and Anh-Vu Phan. Hoang's story shares common threads with other Southeast Asian refugees who escaped by boat, but what sets him apart from the rest is that he really did not mean to escape Vietnam. His journey was a complete accident.

Before we tell Hoang's erratic story, we must set the stage. After the First Indochina War, which ended almost a century of French colonial rule in Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos), the treaty signed at the Geneva Conference in 1954 declared that Vietnam would be split at the 17th parallel, with the expectation that a reunification election would take place in 1956.[1]

[1] Mitchell Hall, *The Vietnam War,* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 6

Although both envisioned a reunified Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the Viet Minh forces, would control the North, and Emperor Bao Dai would control the South. The two men envisioned reunification differently.l. Minh would go on to accept support from the Soviet Union and China, both of which were communist states at the timeand Emperor Bao would take in western spheres of influence, prioritizing capitalism and democracy. During this time, the United States was also battling with the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Due totensions between the United States and Soviet Union, the era of the "Red Scare"[2], which started in 1919, became a lot more prominent. That is why, "... following the Geneva Conference, Eisenhower moved to replace France as the dominant power in Indochina."[3] In order to stop the spread of communism, as articulated in Eisenhower's Domino Theory, the United States strengthened its hold on South Vietnam and helped turn it into a strictly non-communist state. Ngo Dinh Diem, South Vietnam's last president, executed a "Denounce the Communists" campaign in 1954.[4] This action threatened Ho Chi Minh's plans of reunification; he wanted to avoid war and "establish political options for Diem in the South while consolidating his power in the North."[5] The communists in the South, however, felt differently. They had been plotting to overthrow Diem since 1956, but because of the leaders in the North at the time,, they held back. As Diem became more aggressive, they retaliated. "... Fighting between Saigon's [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] and southern insurgents broke out when Diem sent troops into communist strongholds. Southern

[2] "Red Scare" was a term used to denote the surge of anti-communist ideologies that were not only shared societally but were encouraged through government-issued propaganda.

[3] Hall, 12

[4] Hall, 16

[5] Hall, 16

party membership dropped from 5,000 to 1,700 that year, as ARVN killed 2,000 and arrested 65,000 suspected communists by the end of 1957."[6]

With the context provided, Hoang's story can now be shared and understood.. In 1959, his mother, a southern insurgent/Viet Cong spy living in Phan Thiet was arrested by the ARVN. Upon her capture, she was interrogated and thrown into a prison cell. After a couple of days and small conversations, the soldier who arrested her pitied her. They fell in love and had Hoang on January 1st, 1960. She was eventually released and subsequently quit being a spy, but was disheartened to find out that the man she loved already had a wife and children. She went on to live in a small house in Phan Thiet, shunned by her family for having an illegitimate child, and raised Hoang on her own. Since they were incredibly poor and not supported by anyone else, Hoang and his mother faced a lot of difficulties as he was growing up. Hoang's wife recalls, " I remember your dad would say that he was little at the time. At around 3:30 AM to 5:00 AM, around that time, he had to wake up and help his mother start and maintain a fire in order to cook food to sell. He also helped her wash dishes...He would go to school and after school was over, he would go and buy baguettes to sell around Phan Thiet to make extra money. It was for his breakfast, school supplies, and other stuff. He never asked her for money, he worked for his own. He was only 5 years old." During this time, the soldiers of the ARVN would also go around asking villagers to point out Viet Cong spies. According to Hoang's wife, some spies would act as homeless people, and would "manipulate" villagers into giving them clothes and shelter. The ARVN would, in response, scope out these suspected insurgents. As a child, Hoang would be bribed by these soldiers: "He remembered as a kid, [the soldiers] would give him candy, bread, and things in order to ask where the Viet Cong spies were. The soldiers wanted to arrest them."

[6] Hall, 16

As Hoang got older, he was able to help offer some support to his mother by getting small jobs. Since Phan Thiet is a beach city, he sought out fishing. When he was thirteen, he would ask to do small things, like helping out on some of the villagers' boats in return for fish so that he and his mother had something to eat. In 1976 when Hoang was sixteen,the Vietnam War had ended. South Vietnam was extremely poor; Kayley reminisced about her own childhood in Saigon, stating that no matter how hard her family worked, they could never have enough food. She conspired that the Viet Cong starved people in the South in order to prevent them from fighting back, and in part, she was right. After the War ended, the communist government imprisoned anyone suspected of not supporting the Viet Cong. One million South Vietnamese were imprisoned, sent to "re-education camps", and were worked until they became sick or died.[7] If they were released, they would face exclusion or persecution.[8] This, however, did not apply to Hoang.Kayley mentioned that he received unspoken protection because his mother was once a Viet Cong spy. They did not make his life harder, but they didn't make it easier either. He continued to work hard to put food on the table for his small family. The villagers he'd previously helped out had him go fishing with them, and they would leave for weeks at a time. Because they were out at sea for so long and the early mornings would get cold, Hoang picked up smoking cigarettes to keep warm. This decision would haunt his wife and children later. The villagers, admiring his hard work and pitying him, would give him small amounts of money in addition to fish.

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[7] Linda Trinh Vo, "Managing Survival: Economic Realities for Vietnamese American Women", *Asian/Pacific Islander American Women,* Shirley Hune and Gail Nomura. (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003), 241

[8] Vo, 241

When Hoang turned 18 in 1978, plans of escape were whispered throughout the village. The villagers were tired of living under the Viet Cong, unsatisfied with their poor treatment and the non developing economy of Vietnam The boat owners would secretly plan escape routes with some of their close friends and family, but keeping it very restricted as they were afraid the Viet Cong would catch them. Hoang would hear these plans and rush home, relaying them to his mom. He begged her to escape with him multiple times, but she refused. She was afraid of being caught. Loyal to his mother, Hoang agreed to stay with her in Vietnam until one fateful day.

Kayley recalled when he told her this story. Their son, Anh-Vu, had just turned 6 and was playing at Huntington Beach. The couple sat on the grass, watching their child play. The sun was setting and the breeze was cool. She remembers clearly that, without looking at her, he told her his story. Talking to me on the phone, she takes a deep breath before beginning. "That morning, it was 4:00am. He got up to go work at the boats. As he's climbing on the boats, he's wondering, 'Why are there 16-17 people on board?' The owner of that boat had planned to escape; he told people in the village that if they wanted to escape, they'd have to give him three gold sticks. But your dad didn't know anything, again he was just trying to go to work, to go fishing, and go back to his mom at the end of the day. It was very chaotic; when he was climbing up, people kind of just pushed him into the boat. There were people he didn't recognize. When they were out at sea, your dad finally asked around to see who these people were or what was happening. The people responded, 'Keep quiet, we're leaving.' And he understood."

Escaping by boat was an extremely difficult feat, and yet many Southeast Asian refugees employed this method. Boat refugees are part of the second wave of refugees who left Southeast Asia, and in Vietnam, it is estimated that one million refugees escaped by boat between 1978 and

1979.[9] The goal of the journey was to make it to one of the refugee camps in Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines, Hong Kong, or Indonesia. This was easier said than done. The first feat making sure not to get caught by the Viet Cong. In Ronald Takaki's book *History of Asian Americans: Strangers from a Different Shore,* Thai Dang and Takaki describe her last moments in Vietnam, "...As Dang and other refugees were on their way to the hiding place of the boat, they were 'discovered and hunted like beasts' by the Vietnamese forces. 'I ran, fell, and ran for my life in the unknown darkness of a strange forest, totally oblivious to my bleeding wounds.'"[10] Thi Bui, in her memoir, *The Best We Could Do,* recounts her moments escaping by boat with her family and family's friends. As her party's boat sets out, they subsequently hit river islands with boat patrols. Everyone except for the boat owner goes below the deck, and even children are injected with valium in order to be kept quiet. Thankfully, their boat was not stopped and suspected.[11] After making it out far enough, the next two worries are having enough resources (food, water, fuel) to last the grueling trip (which could take weeks), and being careful around the Gulf of Thailand, as there were pirates. Linda Trinh Vo states, "It is estimated that approximately 10 to 15 percent of those fleeing died on the treacherous high seas in makeshift,

[9] Vo, 242

[10] Ronald Takaki, *History of Asian Americans: Strangers from a Different Shore,* (New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company Hachette Book Group, 1998), 452

[11] Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir,* (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2017), 236-239

often overcrowded boats, with insufficient water and food."[12] If escapees ran into pirates, they would take advantage of the escapees' vulnerable state and assault them, and rob them. Women and girls were "assaulted, raped, abducted, and tortured, and some were murdered and tossed overboard…"[13] Long Bot Chau, a boat refugee, tells the story of her and her husband's encounter with the Thai pirates. Their party consisted of two dozen refugees on a thirty-foot vessel, and their boat was attacked off the coast of Thailand by the pirates. They chopped off her husband's fingers to get his ring and then clubbed him to death. They then systematically raped the young girls on deck.[14] Though boat refugees endured a lot in their journey, there were some silver linings where escapees encountered European or American ships who would rescue them.

For Hoang, the story takes that path. After escaping, he had been at sea for about two weeks. Kayley sighed as she told this part of his story. "They'd run out of food and water, and everyone was exhausted. The worst part was that the boat's motor was completely dead and out of gas. They were stranded. The boat owner said that they needed to wait for a ship to come by and rescue them. Everyone on the boat prayed extremely hard. One day passed, there was no ship in sight. Two, three days passed. There was nothing. Then on the fifth day, your dad said that a German ship was cruising by. Everyone on the boat yelled and waved and took white clothes and waved them around, signaling for help. The Germans came and rescued everyone on

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[12] Linda Trinh Vo, "Managing Survival: Economic Realities for Vietnamese American Women", *Asian/Pacific Islander American Women,* Shirley Hune and Gail Nomura. (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003), 241

[13] Vo, 241

[14] Ronald Takaki, *A History of Asian Americans: Strangers from a Different Shore,* (New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown, and Company Hachette Book Group, 1998), 453

your dad's boat. If that German ship hadn't been there, your dad would have died. The boat that he was on was made of wood, not metal. It was about to fall apart. He was very lucky." After being rescued, the Germans took everyone on Hoang's boat to the shores of Malaysia, where they were taken to a refugee camp. There, he stayed close with a friend from Phan Thiet, who would become the equivalent of my godfather. He and this friend were then transferred from Malaysia to a camp in Greece before being sponsored by the Catholic church to Amarillo, Texas. He'd made it, safely.

When he got to America in 1980, the first thing Hoang did was write a letter back to his mother explaining everything that happened. He was gone for about two years at this point, and due to the chaotic nature of refugee camps and him being transferred to Greece, he did not have the opportunity to contact her. Following that, he was able to take English classes for six months and was subsequently given the opportunity to work at a beef-packing factory. After a while, the work was incredibly taxing, so he moved to Kansas to work in another factory. However, because it was cold, he decided to move back to Texas, where the weather was much more similar to Vietnam. After living in Texas for six years, he started talking to his friend, who he'd left Greece with, about moving to California. Although receiving 6 months worth of English classes, Hoang still was not familiar with the language. He was not exposed to it before in school nor in person; he felt very lonely and isolated. Kayley shared that he would rant to her about his days living in Texas and Kansas and not being yet well-versed in English, and being called names by the White people living there. They would tell him to go back to his country, and call him "gook"[15]. There were not very many Vietnamese people in Amarillo, or Texas as a whole for

[15] These sentiments were common at the time, as many American families had relatives serve and perished in the Vietnam War. In addition, as an abundance of boat refugees sought asylum in America, it became a burden on the welfare system, and the Southeast Asian refugees were looked poorly upon because of this, and were consequently scapegoated for a number of American political and economic issues.

that matter, during this time. Hoang craved a community where he could eat the same food and speak the same tongue without being ridiculed. So, he and his friend both moved to Garden Grove, California.

When arriving in Garden Grove, a central part of Little Saigon in Orange County[16], he felt at home. Little Saigon is described as an ethnic enclave, a space where people who come from the same ethnic background congregate and inhabit[17]. They open businesses to serve their communities and offer services that many other American businesses wouldn't, like sewing custom Ao Dai and special Banh Mi shops. Members of the community usually spoke their ethnic tongue, and in Little Saigon, most, if not all, inhabitants spoke Vietnamese. It was like a bubble; a place where you could be supported by others who went through the same thing and could understand you. A place where you could escape xenophobia and racism. It was, for Hoang, a new home, and a new beginning.

Shortly after moving to Garden Grove, he was invited on a double date with his friend. There, he met his future wife Kayley. The two married in 1990, and had their first child, Anh-Vu Phan on June 20th, 1991. Eight years later, unexpectedly, they had their second child, Anh-Vy Phan. They raised both of their children in Santa Ana, California, and soaked them in Vietnamese culture. Only Vietnamese was allowed to be spoken in the house because, as Hoang would famously lecture every time he was questioned, "These kids will learn English in school. It's not an issue. Vietnamese? That's the language of the heart. That's our root and our culture. We can't let them forget it. We can't let them forget their community. Their country. They need to know." To be frank, Hoang did not want to stay in America. He had planned to go back to

[16] For context, this Little Saigon is the largest one in the United States.
[17] Pawan Dhingra and Robyn Magalit Rodriguez, *Asian America: Sociological and Interdisciplinary Perspectives,* (Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2014), 76

Vietnam at some point, to be with his mother and to raise his family there too, but only if the communists were overthrown. His wish, however, was partly fulfilled.

In 2004, after a doctor's visit for a petty cough, Hoang was told he had six months to live. As a result of his severe cigarette addiction, he had been diagnosed with stage four terminal lung cancer. The cancer was slowly spreading to his bones. By the fourth month, he was hospitalized, declared comatose, and a few days after, he left this world peacefully. His remains were cremated and he was brought back to Vietnam, where he rests today in a Buddhist temple.

Hoang might be gone, but his story lives on in his family and the Vietnamese and greater Southeast Asian American communities. It is a story of resilience. It is a thread that weaves our community together, and as the second generation Vietnamese and Southeast Asian Americans grow up, we've begun unweaving these threads and peering into our history. We've begun retelling our parents' stories, which were hidden by shame, racism, erasure, and underrepresentation. We are reconnecting our roots and we will reclaim our land, our culture, and our history. As we continue commemorating Asian American and Pacific Islander History month, we must remind ourselves to remember the fallen, their stories, and our histories. We must tell our stories. We are no longer invisible; we demand to be seen.

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Interview Transcription

Interviewer: Anh-Vy Phan
Interviewee: Kayley Phan, the wife of Hoang Minh Phan and the mother to Anh-Vy Phan
Location: This interview was conducted via FaceTime. Anh-Vy was in the Bay Area, California and Kayley was in Southern California. The date was May 2nd, 2020 at 10:37AM to 12:00PM
General Notes: The interview was conducted in Vietnamese, but will be translated into full English.
Kayley Phan will be denoted as **KP**
Anh-Vy Phan will be denoted as **AVP**

Anh-Vy Phan: Okay so, tell me about Dad's life when he was like a kid and he was growing up. Did he ever tell you anything like that?
Kayley Phan: When he was a kid?
AVP: Yeah.
KP: Growing up?
AVP: Yeah.
KP: What age would you like to know about?
AVP: Around 5-10 years old. What did he do? How did he live?
KP: Okay, as he told me, when he was growing up, he didn't live with his dad. As I told you before, his mother raised him as a single mom. It was really hard at that time. Your dad had to help his mother with a lot of different things. Um, a long time ago, his mother sold Vietnamese desserts, and Vietnamese udon noodle soup, and dessert tofu. Do you know what that is?
AVP: Yeah.
KP: The tofu that we eat with sugar water?
AVP: Yeah.
KP: I remember your dad would say that he was little at the time. At around 3:30am to 5:00am, around that time, he had to wake up and help his mother start and maintain the fire in order to cook the food to sell. There were days where she would sell the soup, then other days she would sell tofu dessert, or other desserts. It would rotate throughout the week; there wasn't just one thing that she sold. He helped her wash the dishes, clean the soybeans, and maintain the fire. He was so little at the time. He never dared ask her for stuff like books or school supplies. He would go to school and go and buy baguettes to sell around Phan Thiet to make extra money. It was for his breakfast, school supplies, and that stuff. He never asked her for money, he worked for his own. That's what he told me.
AVP: My paternal grandma lived in Phan Thiet her entire life? She never moved anywhere?
KP: Uh, your dad only mentioned that she lived in Phan Thiet, but when she was an adolescent she lived somewhere else, I forgot. But she's only lived in Phan Thiet the past 50-60 years.
AVP: What about my paternal grandpa? Where did he live/grow up?
KP: I'm not too sure about him, but I think he's from Phan Thiet too.

AVP: Okay. When the Vietnam War happened, how old was Dad?
KP: When the Vietnam War happened?
AVP: Yeah.
KP: When the Vietnam War happened...your dad was born 1960.
AVP: So the war happened around 1965...so he was around 5. (Correction, the Vietnam War happened 1955 so he would have been unborn, but experienced the war up until he was 15 as the war ended in 1975).
KP: Yeah. About 5 years old.
AVP: Did he ever tell you about his feelings during the war, such as fear, or anything special that happened?
KP:Hmm...he didn't say much about that because he was a kid, so he didn't know. But, he remembered as a kid people would give him candy, bread, and such in order to ask where the Viet Cong spies were. They wanted him to point out the Viet Cong spies in order for the soldiers of the South to arrest them. They went everywhere to ask because the Viet Cong spies were everywhere, they would go into people's homes and manipulate them into giving them clothes and shelter. They would also get these people to turn against and protest against the Southern forces, sweet-talking them and brainwashing the Southern Vietnamese citizens. They would badmouth the American soldiers and Southern soldiers. So, in response, the Southern soldiers would investigate in the villages and scope out the suspects. There weren't many spies in the city, but there were so many in the rural villages. Your grandpa from your dad's side's job was to arrest the Viet Cong spies, he was an informant for the American soldiers. Your grandmother from your dad's side was an informant for the Viet Cong. She was an undercover spy.
AVP: After Dad was born, did she continue being a Viet Cong spy?
KP: After your dad was born, she stopped. Your grandfather (paternal) arrested your grandmother and interrogated her. He brought her to a prison and thought she was pretty. After that, your grandmother became pregnant with your father. She gave birth to him and fell in love with your grandfather, and because of that, she left the Viet Cong.
AVP: I see. Did my paternal grandfather have another family?
KP: Yeah, he has one wife and three kids before he met your grandmother. Your grandmother was a mistress.
AVP: So after the war ended, did he ever say he was scared? Around 1975.
KP: Of course he was scared. He didn't know how extreme the Viet Cong would be or what they would do. He was very scared.
AVP: What year did he leave Vietnam?
KP: He left 1978.
AVP: So the Vietnam War ended in 1975, and Dad left in 1978. During the three years in between, did Dad tell you how the Viet Cong treated him?
KP: The Viet Cong didn't treat him worse or better, because his mother was once part of the Viet Cong informants.
AVP: So then Dad was protected in a sense, right?

KP: Yeah.
AVP: If his life wasn't made more difficult by the Viet Cong, and his mom had so much allegiance to them, what made him want to leave Vietnam?
KP: He didn't want to leave. Actually, there were a few times he asked his mother to leave with him when he was 18, but she didn't want to so then he didn't want to. At that time, villagers would go fishing at the beaches in Phan Thiet, and your dad would ask to come with them to help in return for fish in order for his mother to cook. The villagers pitied him so they also gave him money. They would go out to sea for weeks at a time to fish. At that time, Vietnam was extremely poor. When the Americans left and the Viet Cong took over, the Viet Cong were brutal to our people. They would starve people and not distribute food. You could not make money, no matter how hard you tried. I remember when I lived in Saigon, my grandmother would only make one cup of rice and she would mix it with noodles, sweet potatoes, and cassava in order to make the rice puff up. My father at the time, he was taken as a prisoner of war by the Viet Cong when they took over in 1975. He was a soldier for the Southern forces, and was therefore suspicious. They would take him into the jungle and have him dig up trees, plant trees and build houses. They made him suffer. They were evil and fucking liars. They brainwashed him, and the camps were so far. We couldn't find him. Our household was so poor, we had to eat without meat. There were 8 mouths to feed, it was very difficult. We would eat nuoc mam paste instead of eating meat. That's why when you would eat and you would leave grains of rice in the bowl, I would yell at you. When I was young, I couldn't waste that. I would get beaten if I did. I would have to kneel and cross my arms as punishment. We were so hungry. We suffered. I'm telling you this to illustrate how difficult it was to live under the Viet Cong. They let the country be poor and hungry in order for them to control us. If we were poor and hungry, we couldn't fight against them. Now going back to your dad's story: when he turned 18, he would go fishing with his fellow villagers. He would go with them, and they would pay him, but he wouldn't get paid much because he was young. There were some days, the boat owners would discuss escaping. They couldn't stand living with Viet Cong; our country wasn't developing. People were poor and hungry. Our culture was dying. There were so many who escaped by boat. So then, your dad told me that when he would relay these plans of escape to his mother, she wouldn't want to go because she was scared. So he agreed to stay. Then there was this one day, and this was by coincidence. He didn't plan to escape. That morning, it was 4:00am. He got up to go to work at the boats. As he's climbing on the boats, he's wondering, "Why are there 16-17 people on board?" The owner of that boat had planned to escape; he told people in the village that if they wanted to escape, they'd have to give him three gold sticks. But your dad didn't know anything, again he was just trying to go to work, to go fishing. It was very chaotic, when he was climbing up, people kind of just pushed him into the boat. There were people he didn't recognize. When they were out at sea, your dad finally asked around to see who these people were or what is happening. The people responded, "Keep quiet, we're leaving."