

*Becoming Refugee  
American*

THE ASIAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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# Becoming Refugee American

*The Politics of Rescue  
in Little Saigon*

Phuong Tran Nguyen



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*To Mom and Dad*

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### 3 “Farewell, Saigon, I Promise I Will Return”

#### *Social Work and the Meaning of Exile*

It was only until 1977 that I achieved a certain degree of emotional balance and started to face my conscience with the question: Is there any meaning to this forsaking of my homeland? I answered with my first song as an exile, “Did We Fight or Did We Flee?”

—Phạm Duy, folk musician in exile

For us the Vietnam War is over. Like it or not, we lost that war. But while there, we sold many of its people a way of life, an attitude. And now they are the losers and we face a moral dilemma. Out there is the Statue of Liberty with its inscription, *Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free*. It says nothing about Category 1, 2, 3, or Category 4.

—Ed Bradley, CBS Reports, *The Boat People*, 1979

In the summer of 1977, Phạm Duy suddenly reversed course on his pledge to steer clear of Vietnamese people in the United States. Embodying good refugees committed to assimilation, the fifty-six-year-old folk musician and his family had spent the past two years in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, saving enough income from nostalgic concerts and guitar instruction books to afford a used car and a small place of their own. But only a few months after buying the house, this family of four, like thousands of their coethnics, migrated to southern California, where the largest overseas Vietnamese community was taking shape.<sup>1</sup> Phạm Duy, whose career as the voice of a nation had come to an end with the fall of Saigon, had discovered a new transnational audience eager to learn the meaning of exilic ethnicity beyond just gratitude to the United States. Eager for reinvention, he joined a literal movement of former South Vietnamese that redefined

refugees—once little more than the losers of the war—as the new heroes of the postwar. Though trained as a musician, Phạm Duy became a social worker of sorts, as did others who longed to make meaning out of exile. In less than five years, good refugees were no longer just assimilationists in America. They were exiles of a lost nation, casting themselves on the right side of Vietnamese history.

Not too long after the United States had finished resettling more than one hundred thousand Indochinese refugees, more than four hundred thousand others poured out of communist Southeast Asia and sought asylum in neighboring noncommunist countries. Known as the boat people, the members of this wave of refugees were far less urbanized, educated, and Christian than those who left in 1975.<sup>2</sup> Some were ethnic Chinese, a group treated as outsiders once their adopted nation went to war with their ancestral home. Some hailed from Cambodia and Laos rather than from Vietnam. For the most part, these were precisely the people the communists had promised to liberate, but those who survived the dangerous journey by sea reported widespread human rights abuses in Vietnam. The plight of Saigon's upper crust suddenly appeared much more representative of the fate of the Vietnamese people as a whole.

Vietnam's post-1975 history has always been a contentious one, with pro- and anticommunist camps distrusting each other's sources and stories. The first wave of Vietnamese refugees brought to American shores, especially those who worked for the Saigon and U.S. government, had reason to fear communist reprisals, but their testimony, lacking much in firsthand knowledge, bordered on hearsay and hyperbole. The subsequent exodus of hundreds of thousands of other people without the aid of American warships told a different story. Having lived under communism and had firsthand experience with censorship, new economic zones, and reeducation camps, their stories conveyed a complexity and realism missing from both pro- and anticommunist propaganda. That so many braved the South China Sea despite the fact that they were nearly as likely to die as to escape, spoke volumes about the society they could no longer tolerate.

This chapter examines how refugee history, so often lost within official histories that depict émigrés as either disaffected losers of a civil war or grateful recipients of some nation's kindness, experiences that rare moment when—to paraphrase Nhi Lieu—the exile becomes the authentic.<sup>3</sup> For all their gratitude and hard work, the first wave of refugees, with their worldwide reputation as out-of-touch elites collaborating with imperialist America, garnered little sympathy beyond U.S. shores. They pondered the

meaning of exile, mildly confident that loneliness in America was preferable to persecution in Vietnam yet unable to escape their identity as abject failures now suffering from survivors' guilt. The enormity of the subsequent boat people crisis cast survival in a new light. Stories of oppression and escape that seemed singularly harrowing in other contexts proved quite typical for the Vietnamese. Vilification of the communists provided vindication for fellow escapees, enabling once-disgraced exiles closely allied to the once-disgraced United States suddenly to claim ethnic authenticity with little hint of irony. Mainstream media coverage of the boat people crisis turned even opponents of U.S. military aggression into critics of the Hanoi regime.

Efforts to internationalize the rescue of the boat people had to address both humanitarian and political considerations. Refugee status could not reverse the outcome of the war, but worldwide concern for the boat people could prompt many in the Western world to critically reassess the revolutionary intentions of its victors. The United States parlayed the crisis into an opportunity to use soft power to undo much of the damage to its moral credibility that hard power had wrought, mainly by offering asylum to more than ten thousand boat people per month. The postwar refugees themselves enjoyed far greater social standing as exiled victims of an oppressive regime than they ever had during the war itself.

This transformation of refugees from losers to heroes was most visible in Southern California, where even before the emergence of Little Saigon early communities nurtured the formation and development of an exile collective identity through what I consider social work.<sup>4</sup> Instead of providing traditional social services such as formal counseling and access to basic economic resources, these social workers operated in fields such as the refugee press and popular music. The refugee press interpellated readers as concerned citizens continuing the fight against communism by other means, while songs put refugees' social history to music from a variety of perspectives, including those of refugees in America and of loved ones in Vietnam. Việt Dzũng and other musicians rose to fame by writing ballads about the boat people, earning the admiration of the diaspora and the full wrath of the communists. This music reflected the defiant tone of the boat people exodus, enabling Vietnamese finally to speak freely about life under communism, a process of vindication through vilification.<sup>5</sup> In refugee lore, the boat people came to approximate latter-day Holocaust survivors, offering compelling testimony that brought the world to tears and to action.<sup>6</sup> Given that refugee popular culture made its way back home via the Voice of America and BBC

radio, future boat people learned to identify as refugees in the cultural sense before their journey at sea made them refugees in the legal sense.<sup>7</sup> Even in America, exiles were imagined as the most authentic ethnics because the fissures generated by the Cold War in general and the Vietnam War in particular ensured that, for twenty years, Little Saigon's inhabitants would be characterized as anticommunist refugees. As refugees, the former South Vietnamese achieve a level of credibility and moral authority that was never available to them during the war and found themselves held in a position of high regard that the global community did not accord them either before or since.



## Vietnamese Music

Permanently cut off from their country of origin, the Vietnamese refugees initially treated music like any other cherished fragment of nostalgia, such as photographs or family heirlooms. Refugee sponsors such as Ellen Matthews, for all their generosity and compassion, struggled to comprehend the totality of refugee needs. Thinking of survival only in economic terms, Matthews wondered why the family she sponsored had left Saigon with only clothing, music, and a photo album: “They cannot have seen their situation as I do, to bring records instead of survival items,” she later wrote.<sup>19</sup> Matthews did not realize that most first-wave refugees had less than forty-eight hours to gather their belongings and head out to the airport.<sup>20</sup> Under those circumstances, human nature often leads people to think first about irreplaceable sentimental items rather than such practical items as cash. Celebrated folksinger Phạm Duy, for example, grabbed only twenty U.S. dollars but stuffed an entire suitcase with music albums, photographs, and other keepsakes.<sup>21</sup> By the time the Vietnamese reached the mainland refugee camps, cassette tapes of pre-1975 favorites had become a cottage industry. Recalled musician Việt Dzũng, a teenager at the time, “The only business that was thriving in the camp was making copies of tapes for five dollars apiece, which was a lot of money at the time. You could make a fortune overnight because everyone was asking you to do it, up to the point the tape was so worn out, where it did not sound original anymore, but people still wanted it—all kinds of music at that time . . . whatever they could get their hands on.”<sup>22</sup>

The two major genres of popular music in pre-1975 Saigon were wartime narratives about love and family, particularly the promises soldiers make to return home, and the antiwar songs of Trịnh Công Sơn.<sup>23</sup> References to the Saigon regime and deference to the military found their way into many songs, but the distinguishing characteristic of most South Vietnamese popu-

lar music was its unmistakably sentimental aesthetic, which bordered on the melancholic.<sup>24</sup> Among the most famous of those songs was 1969's "Xuân Này Con Không Về" [I Will Not Be Home for New Year's], a song composed on behalf of troops forced to remain on duty for the Tết lunar new year to prevent a repeat of 1968's infamous Tết Offensive. The song's theme of empty seats at holiday gatherings, along with its incredibly mournful vocal delivery, resonated with exiles:

Nếu con không về chắc mẹ buồn lắm,  
 Mái tranh nghèo không người sửa sang  
 Khu vườn thiếu hoa vàng mừng xuân  
 [If I do not return, mom will be in tears  
 Who will fix the roof, neglected for years  
 Who will tend to the blossoms this coming spring]

When Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese, the communists banned all South Vietnamese propaganda along with symbols of bourgeois decadence such as beauty pageants, modern dresses, and love songs.<sup>25</sup> The communists also did their part to emasculate South Vietnamese music, giving it the subtly effeminate label *nhạc vàng* (literally "yellow music") along with the blatantly effeminate label *ủy mị* (weak, effeminate, sentimental). This move naturalized the outcome of the Vietnam War as a triumph of native masculinity, exemplified in revolutionary songs such as "Liberating the South," with its strident prowar lyrics and crunching rhythms.

Giải phóng miền Nam chúng ta cùng quyết tiến bước.  
 Diệt đế quốc Mỹ, phá tan bè lũ bán nước.  
 [We march onward to liberate the South  
 Eliminate the American imperialists, destroy the traitorous hordes.]<sup>26</sup>

No one knew the excesses of postrevolutionary society better than the hundreds of thousands of military men and intellectuals imprisoned in the post-1975 camps in remote Vietnamese jungles. After long days of forced manual labor, these South Vietnamese political prisoners endured nightly indoctrination sessions designed to "reeducate" them in the history of Vietnam from the communist perspective. If they did not die from starvation, disease, or landmines, these "students" could return home when they had demonstrated their allegiance to communist doctrine.<sup>27</sup> When high school teacher Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn asked his jailers why love songs were deemed antirevolutionary, he was told, "We communists respect love. But it has to be the right kind of love—real love. We respect the love of the Party, the

love of Hồ Chí Minh, the love of the Revolution. These are the proper and acceptable objects of love. The emotion of which you speak [between people] is the basest and most selfish corruption of love: a vile, shallow indulgence of the bourgeoisie.”<sup>28</sup> At the time, most of these details were unknown to the outside world.