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## My Folkloristic History of the Việt Nam War: A Non-communist Experience

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### Abstract

Like many families who were on the “wrong” side of the Việt Nam war, my family history has effectively been “displaced” from official discourse in Việt Nam when the country was “reunified” in 1975, as well as in the discourse of public history in the U.S. which has overwhelmingly emphasized the “lessons” of the “American Experience” in Việt Nam. Using my family history as an index of historical processes, I hope to introduce windows on the continuities of what non-communist Vietnamese do and think. My family folklore is utilized as a way to create opportunities for other non-communist Vietnamese here and elsewhere to connect, articulate, or remind them of a pattern from the past that can provide a contemporary coherence with an ethic workable for the future.

**KEY WORDS:** Việt Nam war, non-communism, folklore/folklife, family history, memory work, memoir, and refugee.

In my family, naming serves as an expression of who we are, what we are, and why we are. As a result, particular intersections of social and political forces in my family’s history since the early 15<sup>th</sup> century have been embedded in my name: Lê Sĩ Việt Long. In Vietnamese, a family name comes first followed by a middle name and a given name. For example, “Sĩ” is one of five middle names that have been passed down successively to our family’s male descendants:

1. Sĩ (scholar/public servant),
2. Tuyển (a fundamental choice),
3. Kiêm (a community of officers),
4. Tài (talent/leadership), and
5. Thúc (competence).



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(Family surname and the five terms were written in Chữ Nôm by my grandfather in his family memoir, “As I Remember...The Lê Genealogy” written in French and completed just before his death in 1982 while residing in France. Together these terms constitute an ever-endless chain.)

These five terms together connote an edict, “Choose public servants among those who have leadership and competence.” This edict is to honor our direct descendant: Lê Lai, who as a military general sacrificed himself to be captured and executed so that Lê Lợi, the eventual founder of the second Lê dynasty (1428-1788), could escape Chinese troops in 1419. When Lê Lợi took the throne in 1428, he directed the descendants of Lê Lai to conduct memorial services of their patriarch one day before his own; thus, the memorial of our family’s founder is inseparable from that of Lê Lợi’s memorial, which is on September 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, respectively.

On the other hand, during the Việt Nam war (1945-1975), when the fate of Việt Nam as a ‘unified’ country was uncertain, my father added “Việt” to all his children’s names. This way his sons would know that they are Vietnamese. And “Long” was to reflect a culture value that my father thought was lacking during the war. “Long,” meaning dragon, symbolizes the mythical origin of unity (but also disunity within that unity) among Vietnamese half of whose children, according to the tradition, followed the mother (Âu Cơ) to the mountain and the other half followed the father (Lạc Long Quân) to the sea. This is because the love between the parents was not enough to overcome their differences. Though the tradition also implies that the separated children “shall let one another know if you are in difficulties, and you shall by no means desert one another” (Durand & Nguyen, 1985, p. 5). In fact, in 1949 my father followed his father to southern Việt Nam when the latter was part of the Associated State of Việt Nam (1949-1954), which did not want the whole country to follow down a communist path. In 1982, I followed my father’s escape “to the sea” because by then there were irreconcilable differences between a “non-communist” and a “communist” when the country was “reunified” in 1975.

By the mid-1990s, however, the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam—no longer seeing the emigration of Vietnamese refugees as a criminal act—began to take a view that all overseas Vietnamese are entitled to having the “rights” in the country’s national unity so long as they fulfill their “duties” to the state. For me, due to a sense of both family’s obligation and personal fulfillment, I purposely chose a career to study Việt Nam’s development. This has led me back to my homeland on a regular basis since 2005. In deciding whether I should carry on the family’s edict in Việt Nam, I have had to make sense of the non-communist versus communist separation, and whether I needed to (and, if so, can) bridge that separation without dishonoring my family’s name. Otherwise, disunity within that unity like that of Âu Cơ and Lạc Long Quân is destined to remain in place.

### **Non-communist Việt Nam: ‘Displaced But Never Replaced’**

In fact, I see my family’s traditions as “folkloristic” in that they are no longer part of an “official history.” Like many families who were on the “wrong” side of the Việt Nam war or on the side of the French and American imperialists, our family histories have effectively been “displaced” from official discourse in Việt Nam. That is, the current Vietnamese state has not made a public space for remembering those who “fought” against the communist revolution (Tai, 2001). On the one hand, historians in Vietnam such as Nguyễn Khắc Viện have asked whether the country in the post-war era has forged “a psychologically unified nation state” and to what extent Marxism is in “a position to assume exclusively and cultural direction of the whole nation” (V. K.

Nguyen, 2004, p. 404). On the other hand, these same historians hesitate more in this era than any other “to give an answer in one direction or in another” because of “unexpected and unpredictable events” (V. K. Nguyen, 2004, p. 406).

Perhaps not until Vietnamese scholars’ call for their own space—writing history as “mirrors” to record facts which has been the ideal for historians to uphold a higher duty and go beyond “loyalty”—is supported will non-communist histories and voices be “recovered” (V. K. Nguyen, 2004, p. 407; Zinoman, 1992). Among the emerging post-war scholars and writers, those born after 1975 and particularly those with an international education, some do acknowledge that they “can’t lead” without approval from “formal authorities inside Vietnam” and “can’t talk” like those of the “informal authorities outside this country” (G. T. Q. Vu, 2010). Yet because the private and public spaces between “can’t lead” and “can’t talk” are dynamic enough to have a prosperous economic future relative to the recent past, for many of the Vietnamese the post-war generation political and historical issues can be resolved at a later time (L. Le, 2009; King, 2008).

Meanwhile, in the U.S., non-communist Vietnamese experiences and traditions, at least in the discourse of public history, have also been “displaced” because of the overwhelming emphasis on the “lessons” of the “American Experience” in Việt Nam (M. H. Nguyen, 1984). In particular, that there was a “lost opportunity” where, had U.S. policymakers correctly recognized Ho Chi Minh’s appeals to U.S. in the 1940s, the war may not have occurred (Bradley, 2000; McNamara, Blight, Brigham, Biersteker, & Schandler, 1999). The current debate led by Robert Buzzanco and (his former student) James Carter has further marginalized the non-communist Việt Nam as a project—not as a viable or a real state. According to Buzzanco’s (2005) and Carter’s (2008) view, the Republic of South Việt Nam was essentially “invented” by the U.S. government, and Việt Nam war was a moral and political disaster and therefore should never be used for other purposes. Thus far, this debate has solidified a space privilege for American scholars in which Keith Taylor’s (2004, 2006) effort to “free” the teaching and research of the Việt Nam war from the antiwar movement’s ideological debris, for example, would “rescue” the former non-communist Vietnamese ally. Meanwhile, Edward Miller’s (2006) use of modernization as a mode of analysis would provide a better understanding of the rivalries among Vietnamese groups that would go beyond the Buzzanco-Taylor debate.

Here, both Taylor’s rescue and Miller’s modernization framework would appear to continue a concealment (dating back to 1954) in which there still is a need for fundamental change of Western/American attitudes toward Vietnamese (Smith, 1968). That is, Taylor’s rescue seems to necessarily present American democracy as noble but which has really never been equipped to understand the problems that traditions posed for non-communist Vietnamese or the problems that socialism is posing for the “reformers” in today’s Việt Nam. Whereas Miller’s modernization framework would enable the “West” to make effective judgments on the “rest,” it rarely allows Vietnamese at any point in time to effectively render judgments on American actions. Noteworthy is a recent work by Wynn Wilcox’s *Vietnam and the West: New Approaches* (2010). Wilcox (2010) highlights that “Vietnam” has always been able to “localize” influences from the “West” which has gone beyond Vietnamese “autonomy,” “response” and “modernization” heuristics. But perhaps because Wilcox’s emphasis on mutual interaction comes from post-regionalism or global intellectualism perspective formulated exclusively in the West, all the “co-figuration” between two entities in his study are in Việt Nam and all are narrated by Westerners.

As historians in Việt Nam have not been given the opportunity to study the past for its own sake while American historians are still debating the why of what really happened during the Việt Nam war, Vietnamese in the U.S. have put their “memories” to work for a place in history (Aguilar-San Juan, 2009). Given the right to assert and negotiate “place-making” in the U.S., the “memory works” of the first generation of Vietnamese Americans have allowed them to recover their past, free their spirits, break their silence, and bring about desired change. That is, through the reconstruction of the “Little Saigon” communities whose leadership is still marked by “elections,” Vietnamese Americans have in many ways put back the “place” into “displacement” in coping with being physically, psychologically, culturally, economically, and intellectually displaced (L. Le, 2011a).

Yet, because the Vietnamese American diaspora is made up of different migration vintages, Vietnamese American identity is always in a state of flux and any “equilibrium state” is often fragile (L. Le, 2011b). Notwithstanding, within the community there has been an effort led by Lê Xuân Khoa (2002) and Lâm Lễ Trinh (2000) to rewrite and to resolve the Việt Nam War, extracting the lessons of the past in order to build a better future, including one with Viet Nam, where there is a need to maintain an impartial objectivity and to consider national sovereignty, multipartism, respect for human rights and social justice. However, there are also “diaCRITICS,” that is, young Vietnamese American scholars of the diaspora such as Nguyễn Thành Việt (2010, para. 1), who “write about the ways that other people write about the Vietnamese” and who “reserve the right to be angry” when “a Vietnamese person somewhere in the world says or does something stupid” or when there is a Vietnamese American anti-communist obsession.

Although the traditions of “Little Saigon” are intimately expressed and communicated in informal settings, they are also the most public activities when the community uses them to symbolize identity for themselves and others. For example, Vietnamese see business ownership as a means to control their destiny in which freedom and security is an important factor in redeeming their war/refugee experiences (Chu, Lei, & Chu, 2010). Thus, the Vietnamese economic business enclave is never purely about business. Rather, the business community is embedded with “a myriad of simultaneous and sometimes contradictory social and historical functions,” as noted in Karin Aguilar-San Juan (2009, p. xxvii). This, in part, explains why, unlike their Asian peers, many Vietnamese businesses have not directly engaged in foreign trade with their homeland, at least not until the current Vietnamese government reforms its “state capitalism” and “illiberal democracy.” On the cultural front, there has been an ongoing documentation of Vietnamese American achievement called *Vẻ Vang Dân Việt (The Pride of the Vietnamese)*, in which the Vietnamese community has declared the superiority of a democratic way of life that has allowed Vietnamese refugees and immigrants to fulfill their human potential (B. N. Nguyen, 2006). And since February 2003, the “Little Saigon” communities have urged state governments and municipalities to pass more than 85 resolutions (including fifteen states) in making the flag of the former South Việt Nam the “Heritage Freedom Flag of Vietnamese Americans” (L. Le, 2011b).

Consequently, the first generation community leaders are not “ghosts of the past.” Instead, they are actively constructing a diasporic community in which non-communism or anti-communism is a vehicle for sustaining an identity and community in the present and “serves as pedagogical tool” for the second generation (Dang, 2005, p. 69). For instance, in rebuilding the community after the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the Vietnamese Versailles Community in East New Orleans “put to use” and “drew on” the tales of overcoming “forced” migrations and catastrophic loss that their ethnic group experienced in 1954 when the country was split into

“two countries,” and again in 1975 with the fall of Sài Gòn (Leong, Airriess, Li, Chen, & Keith, 2007). There is also evidence to suggest that younger Vietnamese Americans, who are “consumers” of the community’s cultural and political activities, are capable of organizing projects that reflect the concerns and needs of the growing and diverse members of the community on both domestic and homeland issues (L. Le, 2011b). Importantly, in the new media age there has been a “cyberexpansion” of the “Little Saigon” community in which its nationalist perspectives are articulated “quasi-officially” through U.S. government-funded online news media such *Voice of America-Vietnamese* and *Radio Free Asia-Vietnamese*. While its ability to develop an “online constituency” in Việt Nam is dubious, the “Little Saigon” virtual diaspora has achieved unprecedented and widespread visibility in the homeland. These online Vietnamese language media outlets have become for many Vietnamese in Vietnam a source of alternative news and information that Việt Nam’s state-run media does not provide or allow.

### **A Family Pattern that Connects**

Using my family history as an index of historical processes, I hope to introduce windows on the continuities of what non-communist Vietnamese do and think, which often can be hidden in full view or overlooked by the conventional disciplines. In examining historical events and movements, I attempt to examine the interplay between my family as “agents” of the non-communist experience across space and time and the forces within the larger socio-political contexts shaping the experiences of “agents” before, during, and after the Việt Nam war. My family folklore is not used to identify or present the non-communist Vietnamese experience adequately or typically. Rather, family folklore is utilized as a way to create opportunities for other non-communist Vietnamese here and elsewhere to connect, articulate, or remind them of a pattern from the past that can provide a contemporary coherence with an ethic workable for the future (Fischer, 1986). Moreover, in articulating a pattern that is quite possibly unknowable to outsiders, the responsibility is to acknowledge the complexity, confusion, and discontinuity of the actions of the “agents” (McCarl, 1992). By many accounts, articulated patterns or local cultural statements had played a central role in the “births” of Việt Nam (Taylor, 1983; Wolters, 1979, 1980). Similarly, the rebirth(s) of a non-communist Việt Nam will also depend on patterns that connect, if its traditions were to be absorbed into a pattern that has value over time and through space (Aguilar-San Juan, 2009).

If the modern world has made my family history “unofficial, non-institutional knowledge and experience,” my family’s ability to balance between adaptation and change has allowed us to recall, retell, and redeem our traditions in the post-modern world. That is, in the process of communicating ideas that connect the past and the present, my family’s traditions have been passed down through and accepted by subsequent generations. On the one hand, there are continuities and consistencies in my family’s traditions through time and space. As noted earlier, as a “Sĩ,” I represented the family’s 11<sup>th</sup> generation from the family’s founder Lê Lai, and my older brother’s son, Lê Tuyển Việt Khang, is the family’s 12<sup>th</sup> generation. Moreover, our family’s history is still recorded today in several family genealogies by my paternal grandmother’s and grandfather’s relatives in Hà Nội, who had sided with Hồ Chí Minh’s forces since 1945.



(The ancestral altar of our direct descendant, Lê Lai, has been maintained by relatives in Hà Nội. These relatives have also updated my family history in their family genealogies through communication with other relatives in France.)

On the other hand, there are traditions that have been rearticulated in securing my family's "good name" in "new times" or "new places." Such were the conditions when the French colonized Việt Nam. Here, my paternal grandfather, Lê Tài Trung (1930, 1941), had written in French publication in the 1930s and 1940s that French colonialism was of the "spirit," which could offer Vietnamese the opportunity to become "intellectual hybrids" with "two homelands." My grandfather attended middle and high schools at Lycee du Protectorat from 1914 to 1926, coming to the study of Western thoughts and science at a relatively early age. But he also participated in the student strike in 1926 organized after the death of Phan Châu Trinh—a nationalist who promoted "new learning" where within the French colonial system Vietnamese could and should replace monarchy with democracy and popular rights for Vietnam's future. According to his family memoir, "As I Remember...The Lê Genealogy" written in French and completed in 1982, my grandfather was suspended for three months and did not return to the Lycee (T. T. Le, 1982). Either he was able to reconcile or saw no contradiction my grandfather began to work for the French Superior Resident in the late 1920s. Moreover, in one of his published articles, he was concerned with other Vietnamese "intellectual hybrids" such as reputable scholar Trần Trọng Kim, who he thought was perhaps too conservative in trying to make neo-Confucian paragons the "roots" of Vietnamese modernity (T. T. Le, 1930). In my grandfather's writings, terms such as "collaborator" and "bourgeois" had positive connotation, signifying an agent for change within the colonial system and a new class of learned men, respectively (T. T. Le, 1930, 1941). From 1941 to 1945, my grandfather became the press bureau chief under the French Vichy Government, who consented to Japanese occupation of French Indochina during this time. To be sure, western scholars such as Anne Raffin (2002) consider works during this period, including those by my grandfather, to be propaganda.

Notwithstanding, it was the Vichy Government that began to expand social rights to Vietnamese, although its purpose was to ward off both Vietnamese anti-French movements and "Asia for Asians" as expounded by Japanese occupiers in order to retain "loyalty" and "unity" for the French Indochina. Yet, many Vietnamese who had benefited from Vichy's colonial policy later created or joined nationalist movements, both communist and non-communist. The non-communist path was led by Bảo Đại—Việt Nam's last emperor who ascended the Nguyễn's

throne in 1932. He dropped his given name Vĩnh Thụy and took on the dynastic name Bảo Đại, meaning “keeper of greatness” (Ball, 1967). Even though Bảo Đại was often seen as a French puppet, before Japanese withdrawal from Indochina in mid-1945, he along with Trần Trọng Kim seized the opportunity given by their Japanese overseers to “de-Franchify” Việt Nam. They formed a government and officially reclaimed the country’s cultural and intellectual rights by changing the national name back to Việt Nam from French Indochina, adopting the Vietnamese Romanized script as the official language, replacing the French colonial language, and renaming the three regions of the country as Bắc Bộ (former Tonkin), Trung Bộ (former Annam), and Nam Bộ (former Cochinchina) (N. C. Vu, 1986). These decrees remain in place today. My grandfather was among those who followed the above path, “siding” with the French but diplomatically demanded “Việt Nam was for Vietnamese.” This played out when the Việt Minh forces under Hồ Chí Minh’s leadership took control of Hà Nội in August of 1945. That year, my grandfather fled first to Sài Gòn and then to Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, my grandfather joined forces with Bảo Đại.

By this time, Bảo Đại had already abdicated his throne in August of 1945 to the growing power of Hồ Chí Minh. In his imperial abdication, Bảo Đại declared that he rather be a citizen of an independent country than emperor of an enslaved one (Ball, 1967). At the same time, in his abdication to the Ho Chi Minh’s government, he explicitly requested for an absolute union of the entire population in which the name Việt Nam was not to be abused (Marr, 1997). However, a year after his abdication, Bảo Đại “disassociated” himself from Hồ Chí Minh and made way to Hong Kong, when the Việt Minh began to assassinate key non-communist members and began to create a communist Democratic Republic of Việt Nam. In 1947, when the French (who had returned to northern Vietnam in late 1945) went on a military offensive, the Việt Minh withdrew from Hà Nội. This enabled my grandfather to rejoin his family who had stayed behind in the countryside outside Hà Nội. From 1947 to 1954, northern Việt Nam’s geographical division between noncommunist and communist was based on urban-rural, where the latter controlled most of the countryside while the former held the cities and the lowlands (Pham, 1990). Like Bảo Đại, my grandfather probably wanted to secure an “independent” state of Việt Nam without having to go down a “communist path” and without severing ties with France. Moreover, like Trần Trọng Kim, my grandfather was against “human cleverness” which could lead people to kill and destroy in the process of seeking the “truth” (K. T. Tran, 1936; D. T. Nguyen, 1959). Elites like my grandfather, Bảo Đại, and Trần Trọng Kim seem to espouse an evolutionary change in Vietnamese society, wanting to bind the country’s factions and social strata together so as to prevent a breakdown of social and moral order according to which the ideal citizen was a person “who combined a ‘scientific’ mind with ‘traditional’ virtue, expressing cultural hybrid between the East and the West” (N. C. Vu, 1986, p. 305). However, it is likely to be true that the problem with elites like my grandfather was that either they became progressively alienated from ordinary citizens or ordinary citizens became progressively alienated from them (Ton, 1967).

When Bảo Đại returned as the head of Government of the Associated State of Việt Nam, though within the French Union in 1949, my grandfather was named both the director of political affairs in the Imperial Cabinet and assistant Chief of Staff for Civil and Military Affairs. A year later, the U.S. granted the recognition of the Associated State of Vietnam. A year earlier, the Truman administration explicitly viewed Hồ Chí Minh and Democratic Republic of Việt Nam as inappropriate partners for its plans for a postcolonial independent state in Việt Nam (Bradley, 2000). To be sure, the Associated State of Việt Nam knew the strength of Hồ Chí Minh’s government, which was based on its symbolism: “hope for a better future.” However, those



associated with the State of Việt Nam thought that Hồ Chí Minh's "revolutionary hope" would only lead to despair that would need another kind of hope: "hope for social and economic reforms undertaken within a truly democratic society" (L. Buu, 1952, p. 247). For Associated State of Việt Nam, independence would only have value if it could also succeed in modernizing the country and its economy, which basically became the roadmap of "nation-building" for non-communist nationalists (Hoang, 2008). On the one hand, the creation of the Associated State of Việt Nam was "an endless shuffle of transfer agreements, protocols, and registers that excited the imagination of no one and frittered away the psychological impact of the achievement" (Ball, 1967, p. 216). On the other hand, this state was strong enough that the decision of the Geneva Accord of 1954 led to a kind of partition that allowed a non-communist Republic of South Việt Nam to be established (Ball, 1967). Not to be overlooked, among the nearly million who migrated southward, its movement was "inspired by opposition to an odious dictatorial regime, rather than a planned movement toward fertile lands" (Bui, 1959, p.59).



(At center is my grandfather. On his left is Bảo Đại, Chief of the Associated State of Vietnam, 1949-1954. On his right is General Nguyễn Văn Hinh who was appointed by Bảo Đại as the Vietnamese National Army Chief of Staff. My grandfather was appointed as Chief of Staff for Political Affairs. The picture was taken sometime between 1951-1952.)

Just before the 1954 partition, Bảo Đại had chosen Ngô Đình Diệm to head the South Vietnamese government, independently of the United States (Anderson, 1991). Unlike Bảo Đại and my grandfather, Ngô Đình Diệm since 1930s emerged as a leader of the "third force," positioning against both French colonial rule and Vietnamese communism (Miller, 2004). Although Ngô Đình Diệm on several occasions had rebuffed invitations to join Bảo Đại's governments, the latter thought the former was the most formidable leader at the time to keep Việt Nam "great," meaning a unified, non-communist state (Miller, 2004). When Ngô Đình Diệm called for a referendum based on which voters in 1955 approved of a new southern republic state with Diệm as president elect, my grandfather also stepped aside and, like other

Vietnamese who had a French citizenship, took his immediate family to France. My father, though, was already in France a few years earlier completing a master degree in engineering.

### **(Re)Locating the ‘Home’ in War and the After the Fall of Sài Gòn**

Like his father, my father, Lê Thức Cần, was opened to western learning at a young age. My father also saw the failure of the French to give Việt Nam the full benefits of its civilization. Nevertheless, he believed that only through the West could Việt Nam develop a modern independent nation. His western education not only strengthened the belief that Vietnamese themselves should decide what to borrow from the West, but also led him to continue the family’s edict in Việt Nam. In fact, my father was the only one of his siblings to return to South Việt Nam. Before returning in 1962, he was sent to the U.S. for a nine months training in the Pennsylvania coal mines, which later became a reference point for him in deciding where to locate the family after escaping Việt Nam in 1982. As the director of the An Hòa Industrial Complex in central Việt Nam (southwest of Đà Nẵng), my father worked with South Việt Nam’s Ministry of Public Works, stabilizing a strategic hamlet under the I Corps Tactical Zone. His job entailed a collaborative effort with the U.S. Marine Corps, developing the complex into a combat base. Not long after my father’s return, the military coup d’état against and assassination of Ngô Đình Diệm took place in November 1963. Ngô Đình Diệm’s successors, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, later formed South Việt Nam’s Second Republic in October of 1967. Statements from this Second Republic described Ngo Dinh Diem’s regime as dictatorial which was “effective in achieving the national stability essential for coping with the initial period of crisis . . . but with the development of greater internal stability, the regime became less, rather than more flexible in its policy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1967, p.77-78).



(At center is my father who was the Director of the An Hoa Industrial Complex. On his left is General Lewis Walt with Lt. Col. William W. Taylor on the right. The U.S. battalion was about to reenter the An Hoa region in Operation Georgia. The picture was taken by Cpl. Robert L. Peragallo, USMC 1/9”B”-1st Plt, 12 of May 1966.)

My father was one of the top five associates at An Hòa Industrial Complex. Three of the five associates later became ministers in the South Vietnamese government. My father was one of the two who did not get involved in politics. At the time, money was required in order to build

one's own party, which was used to leverage and advance within what was called "Sài Gòn politics." According to my father's family memoir, which was added in 2006 to my grandfather's "As I Remember... The Lê Genealogy," this led to elites using their position to increase their own wealth (i.e., "falsifying" payrolls and "selling" contracts) in order to "buy" political support and government positions (C. T. Le, 2006). By 1967, there were more than one hundred groups who had registered as parties and associations. Such figures reflected the fragmentation and polarization that was occurring in South Vietnamese society (D. Nguyen & T. Tran, 1980). Like a number of "technicians," my father saw himself as an "independent" and avoided being pulled into the "Sài Gòn clan." Increasingly, my father became wary of "Sài Gòn politics" in which he believed personal greed and self-aggrandizement had affected South Việt Nam's legitimacy and governance. Perhaps so much so that he named his children's first name based on values/symbol that he thought were lacking at the time: Anh (integrity), Quang (transparency), Trung (loyalty); and Long (dragon, a symbol of Việt Nam). As an "independent," my father did find support from foreign institutions such as USAID and Detroit Edison, who "backed" my father's new position as the Director of Transmission and Distribution of Sài Gòn Power Company in 1969. Months before this position, the U.S. Embassy and USAID officials had also "backed" my father's case of keeping the An Hòa complex open but President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu decided to close it (C. T. Le, 2006). The new position gave him another opportunity to visit the U.S. This time he attended briefing/training in Washington, D.C. and Michigan.

By this time, U.S. military withdrawal was under way and "Vietnamization" was being implemented in which South Việt Nam had to replace both American troops and American resources (H. Buu, 1971). For non-communist Vietnamese scholars writing at the time, this is because the current South Vietnamese government under Nguyễn Văn Thiệu failed in persuading the American public, as well as in working more closely with the U.S. legislative branch in sustaining a democratic order that was right and was a reality for many Vietnamese, as it was for the democratic regime of South Korea (Trong, 1975). To be sure, other non-communist Vietnamese scholars before 1968 had argued that "the more aid Vietnam gets, the faster and deeper the process of social differentiation . . . widening the gap between people and government and making the struggle against Communist subversion and the establishment of a balanced and viable Vietnam more difficult" (Ton, 1967, p.463). These scholars reminded the government of the danger of dependency when the Third French Republic exited Việt Nam in 1940. By 1971, there was an emphasis that if South Việt Nam was to recover self-reliance and self-sufficiency, American aid needed to be continued but restructured—delinking aid way from political personalities and making it Vietnamese in origin and orientation (Trong, 1975). But by 1973, it became increasingly clear that South Việt Nam may not survive in fighting off renewed communist attacks from both northern and southern Việt Nam; finding external financial aid to stabilize its economy; and having the political legitimacy to change the behaviors of government administrators, private sector, and attitudes of people from relying on foreign dependency to developing self-reliance (Trong, 1975).

After the fall of Sài Gòn in 1975, my father decided not to evacuate. He may have thought that he had understood the outcome of the war and may have believed that under a "liberated" and "unified" Việt Nam, those on the "losing" side would still be able to take part in the country's rebuilding. In fact, he also persuaded my grandfather (who came back in the 1960s to live out his retirement) to stay behind with him. However, my father and his colleagues were immediately sent to "reeducation camps." Their lively possessions were confiscated or destroyed and their children would be barred from higher education. Feeling betrayed and knowing that his

children could not secure their “good names” under communist rule, he planned the family’s escape several times and was finally successful in 1982. There were, of course, other non-communist Vietnamese who decided to stay behind after 1975. These included those who championed progressive politics, leading protests against the Ngô Đình Diệm government (1955-1963) and the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu government (1967-1975), believing the patriotism and nationalism, as espoused by the Communist Party, would allow a coalition government to rebuild a better Vietnam (Doan, 2000; Nguyen & Kendall, 1981).

From 1975 to 1981, my father was mostly in and out of prisons. According to my father, my mother, Lê Thu Thảo, “was the bread maker and a real heroine” (C. T. Le, 2006). My mother worked at a bank in Thủ Đức, grew vegetables, raised pigs, and once in a while would receive medications from my father’s relatives in France and would sell them to make ends meet. But because my grandfather had in-laws who had followed the Việt Minh since 1945, our family was more fortunate than most non-communists who had stayed behind or who could not evacuate. One of these relatives became a member of the party’s politiburo and was assigned to a high position in Sài Gòn after 1975. Consequently, my grandfather, with the assistance of the French Embassy, was “granted” the permission to leave for France in 1976 due old age and poor health. My grandfather’s in-laws also “intervened” on behalf of my father in leaving early from his various prison terms. They also “assisted” my father in getting back one of his villas in Thủ Đức in 1981, a suburb outside of Sài Gòn, so that the family has a place they could call home. According to those in-laws (whom I met during my regular trips back to Vietnam since 2005), they tried to convince my father to stay because eventually the government would need such technicians, given that the centrally planned economy was clearly failing. These in-laws had respect for my father because of his education, and that most of the in-laws were also technicians trained in Eastern Europe during the war. But my father, according to the in-laws, had already made up his mind about escaping and was implicitly trying to avoid the in-laws’ insistence.



(Above is a picture of our villa in Thủ Đức in 2005. It has been updated but the structure, which was designed by my father, is still the same. At the time, the villa was owned by Thủ Đức Tourist Co. and had been rented out to Nike executives working in the area. I no longer find it ironic but rather as part of my family’s heritage that I grew up on a street with a Western name (Einstein), which has not been changed since we left the house in late December 1981.)

While at the refugee centers (in East Malaysia and the Philippines), it was apparent to me that we were able to be ourselves (though we also “lost” something that can never be spoken to

“outsiders”). Before in Thủ Đức, my mother reminded me daily of what kids I can play with and what kids I can’t play with. I knew that we were not “Việt Cộng” (communists), and that we identify ourselves with the Americans. In fact, our private entertainment included cassette tapes of the Beatles and the Bee Gees, and I remembered seeing a *Sports Illustrated Magazine* with John McEnroe on the front cover in our house. Thus, going to school and learning English at the refugee camps were something that was fun for my brothers and me. During this time, my father decided to settle the family in the U.S. even though his entire family was well established in France. His reason was that in the U.S. he could still work for a number of years without having to retire early, as would be the case in France. In addition, he knew that social mobility in the U.S. was more fluid, and that his children would have more opportunities to succeed. In the U.S., my father was able to get in touch with his former American colleagues from Detroit Edison, who assisted my father in getting his first job at Bechtel Corporation in Michigan in late 1982.

However, I later learned that my mother’s side of the family was far less fortunate—two of her brothers who were in the South Việt Nam’s air force had been in the “reeducation camps” for more than ten years. Both had military training in the U.S. during the mid 1960s. One came to the U.S. through the Humanitarian Operation Program in 1988, and the other decided to stay behind to take care of his ailing parents who had waited for their children’s release but who by then wanted to die in Việt Nam. The uncle who stayed behind is still treated like a “second-class citizen.” For example, due to a government’s decree in place after the war in 1975, this uncle’s children (and the children of their children) are prohibited from entering state-run universities and working in state-run institutions. Like other non-communist families who remained in Vietnam, the prosperity of the uncle’s family depends, in large part, on remittances from relatives overseas.

### **Conclusion: Putting My “Folklife” to Use**

It has been said that everyone has folk traditions or folklife due to the fact that each of us belongs to various overlapping folk groups (McHale, 1994). Becoming more aware of my “folk” categories—as a descendant of Lê Lai, as a product of a westernized heritage and of a non-communist Việt Nam, as a son to parents who lived under communist rule, as a boat refugee, and as a member of the Vietnamese American community—I have recently become more conscious of how my “folklife” had had an effect on my professional life. For example, while preparing to teach Vietnamese American courses for the first time in spring 2005 at the University of Houston, I remember contemplating on how and what I should cover when discussing the “Vietnamese” and the “Vietnameseness” in Vietnamese America.

Ironically, the University of Houston is also the academic home of Robert Buzzanco. As mentioned earlier, Buzzanco is one of the leading scholars on why U.S. diplomacy got the U.S. in the Việt Nam war which was so unpopular and tragic that the war should not be revised as a “noble cause” because “then American forces can more easily and aggressively intervene” anywhere in the world. On the one hand, Buzzanco’s research and teaching of the Việt Nam war rarely account for, and thus at least indirectly marginalize, the non-communist Việt Nam experiences. In fact, Buzzanco has been criticized within the Houston’s Vietnamese community, who have watched on public television or taken his Việt Nam war course. On the other hand, another of Buzzanco’s protégé, Roy Vũ (2006), had been the first to document a comprehensive study on Houston’s Vietnamese history in creating a southern Vietnamese nationalist identity. Roy also founded Vietnamese Studies courses on campus with the purpose of giving Vietnamese

Americans a voice in academia. It was Roy that got me involved in these courses, when I came back to the campus in fall 2004 as an instructor in political science. I had earned my doctoral degree from the University of Houston in 2002 and was an assistant professor at California State University-Bakersfield from 2002 to 2004.

In spring 2005, I was hired to teach Vietnamese American cultural history courses when I came back to the campus in fall 2004 as an instructor in political science. In hindsight, my “folklife,” which at the time was mostly passed down orally, led me to ask questions that my training in political science could not: Why do Vietnamese American courses tend to discuss exclusively the experiences of Vietnamese in the U.S.? Why do courses on Việt Nam war tend to focus on the American experiences in Việt Nam? And what are teaching pedagogies that effectively could cover the “Vietnamese” and the “Vietnameseness” in the Vietnamese American experience? Even though my expertise was not in Vietnamese history or the Việt Nam war, my “folk groups” allow me to connect and review these literatures enthusiastically. This then had enabled me to reconstruct the courses that I thought at the time would recover the experiences of Vietnamese Americans that have been forgotten because of or marginalized by larger social and political forces. For example, in my Vietnamese American history course, almost half of the course covers the origins of Vietnamese, concepts of change and continuity in Vietnamese history, and the Vietnamese non-communist experiences during the Việt Nam war and its aftermath. Teaching myself these topics also has further informed my “folk groups”. But it wasn’t until Christmas 2006 that my father translated his father’s family memoir, “As I Remember...The Lê Genealogy” from French to English and then added his “as I remember” to it. That same year I was also introduced to a folklore project that records Vietnamese Katrina victims who had come to Houston to rebuild their lives once again, which empower victims to be their own “storytellers” of their experiences in Việt Nam, New Orleans, and in Houston (Lindahl & Jasper, 2009).

In many ways, I was conscious that I was acting as an agent of “social change,” but not until recently have I deliberately put my “folklife” to use. On the one hand, I now recognize that I am a “poorer scholar” for doing so in the sense that the application of my “folklife” has diverted my attention to improve political science concepts in better understanding transnational immigrant communities (which was the topic of my dissertation); and in teaching the recovery of non-communist voices and memories, I may have diverted attention in covering new trajectories in the Vietnamese American community in which social justice causes and multiracial alliance are taking root. On the other hand, I have the intention in putting my “folklife” to use—in my research and teaching on Vietnamese history, Vietnamese American experience, and Vietnam’s transnational development discourse—so as to create conversations. That is, in the process of recovering the “patterns that connect” and “absences” of the non-communist experiences, what do they mean to subsequent generations of Vietnamese Americans? Or should younger Vietnamese Americans come to terms with their family past in their own ways and extend themselves beyond the non-communist/anti-communist identity of their parents’ generation (Vo, 2003)? And/or in the rewriting, rereading, and retelling about the Việt Nam war should the recovery of the “absences” include the women and the children and the men without ranks or guns from both South Việt Nam and North Việt Nam? (Thu Huong, 2005)

In this article, I wish to articulate, and not simplify, my family’s experiences as agents—how they respond to as well as how they are shaped by historical events and movements—as honestly and openly as my personal ideology will allow. Moreover, taking cues from the study of applied folklore, I have not abandoned the importance of ethnographic process, such as taxonomy, documentation, contextualization, literature review, and insider review (McCarl,

1992). The above is to avoid what has been called “fakelore” where folklore is used to glorify a nation-state’s exploitation of myths or fabricate particular traditions for political ideologies or financial gains (Dorson, 1971). It is also to make readers aware about the lived experiences of and the patterns articulated by those who identified themselves with the non-communist Việt Nam before, during, and after the Việt Nam war. Here, I am reminded, in part, because non-communist Vietnamese scholars and writers had engaged in western learning, there is not necessarily a shortage of English language works in peer review journals, particularly during the war. Works during and after the war by those with firsthand knowledge generally should not be considered bias. In fact, a review of these works suggests these authors do not hesitate to self-critique, to condemn their society’s problems or their western allies, and had unique insights on power relations between Vietnam and the West. However, these works have largely been ignored or overlooked in the teaching of the Việt Nam war on U.S. college campuses. This neglect is also true in the teaching of the Vietnamese American Experience and, to a lesser extent, Vietnamese Modern History courses (L. Le, 2004).

In contrast to efforts of covering what non-communist Vietnamese do and think, there are other identity-based projects by younger Vietnamese Americans who are proponents of change rather than continuity—either calling to move toward a “progressive political Asian American identity” or “becoming American as everyone else.” For example, a recent identity project spearheaded by younger Vietnamese American scholars, writers, and artists called “F.O.B II: Art Speaks” is seeking to transcend the “survival and silence” mode and the anticommunist ideology of the first generation of refugees. Opened in the beginning of 2009 in southern California, “F.O.B II: Art Speaks” is an exhibit which featured an interactive voting booth that allows visitors to decide which flag represents them: the flag of the former Republic of South Việt Nam, the official flag of the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam, or their own flag which they created using crayons. The exhibit also features a “Black Room,” which has highly sensitive political materials (i.e., a defamed flag of the former South Republic of Việt Nam with three lines of barbed wires) but with the purpose that visitors should detach themselves from painful memories which such symbols may evoke as “one way for us to heal and move forward as a community” (Vietnamese American Arts & Letters Association, 2009, para. 1). Although the exhibit’s organizers sought to be “sensitive enough for the community” and saw themselves as bridging the gap between the first and second generation, the exhibit was to “test” whether the community is ready to respect the freedom for which it claimed to seek when they left Việt Nam (M. T. Tran, 2009). This project seems to be an effort to challenge the “accepted” anti-communist ideology along with other formulas and narratives, such as immigrant assimilation, “we-win-even-when-we-lose,” and “refugees as a showcase for democracy” (Espiritu, 2006, p. 341). Importantly, by challenging these accepted ideologies, formulas, and narratives, a new progressive ideology can take root within Vietnamese American community.

Another project, led by a group of more “mainstream” Vietnamese American professionals, is attempting to be the first Asian Americans in establishing a million dollar endowment at the Smithsonian Institution. This collaboration resulted in an exhibit, “Exit Saigon, Enter Little Saigon,” which was opened in January 2007 and had traveled to multiple cities until 2010. In many ways, the exhibit’s representation of Vietnamese Americans is “marketed” and explained through the metaphor of the American melting pot which appears to be made enjoyable in a non-threatening way for visitors (L. Le, 2007a). Here, the essence of Vietnamese Americans was visually represented through life-size cutouts of those considered influential in the mainstream, such as *Betty Nguyễn* (former CNN anchor), *Đạt Nguyễn* (former

Dallas Cowboys linebacker), Hậu Thái Tăng (the designer of the 2005 Ford Mustang), *Việt Đình* (former assistant attorney general in the George W. Bush administration), *Eugene Trịnh* (a NASA astronaut), and *Đạt Phan* (winner of NBC's Last Comic Standing Season 1). According to the exhibit's curator, "Exit Saigon, Enter Little Saigon" is to connote that "America has changed us, and we've changed America" (Nguoi Viet, 2007). While the above collaboration acknowledges the relevancy of the exhibit is to "open doors and discussion and inroads of inquiry for current and future generations," there has yet been any programs or spin-off projects to discuss the consequences of portraying the Vietnamese American experiences only through the "melting pot" metaphor within the American heritage, or through the prism of "elite culture" (Nguoi Viet, 2007).

In some ways, the above two projects represent social and political forces within the Vietnamese American community that may cause a loss of the non-communist Vietnamese patterns that "connect" within and across Vietnamese history, Vietnamese American experience, and Vietnam's transnational development discourse. In part, the idea of "putting folklore to use" is to effectively remind Vietnamese Americans and non-Vietnamese Americans of what the loss of patterns (along with "absences" from) the non-communist Vietnamese experiences may mean. Here, *Journey from the Fall* (2007), the first American major motion picture to depict communist re-education camps in Vietnam and the Vietnamese boat experiences, came about because the film's director, Trần Hàm, wanted to provide images to these experiences. Because actual images were not recorded or were erased, Trần Hàm (2007) asked, would thousands of stories about re-education camps and boat people experiences be "all just folklore then?" The film in Vietnamese with English subtitle gave a voice to the non-communist South Việt Nam experience, such as when the main character of the film stated, "The Americans have broken their promise. They have left us." Moreover, the film overtly embedded the legend of Lê Lợi to the turmoil of the fall of South Vietnam where, according to the tale, Lê Lợi was endowed with a magical sword by a Golden Turtle God to liberate the country from China. The film's use of legend appears to be that not until the victor returns the sword to the Turtle God will there be true freedom and peace in the country. At least implicitly, it is implied that the Communist victors had not laid down their arms and allowed for true unification. According to Trần Hàm (2007), "If history is written by the victors, then folklore is the testimony of the vanquished" (para. 1).

For me, in recovering of my family's folkloristic history, I have indeed decided to pass down my family traditions to my two daughters. Like that of my father and his father, I have rearticulated family traditions that I saw fit. For example, receiving my grandfather's and father's family memoir in 2006, I told my father that I wanted the family's five terms to reflect the present, adding "Tuyển" to my daughter's name. Daughters are not allowed to carry on the five terms. Thus, my daughter's name Lê Thu Trang (born in 2003) became Lê Tuyển Thu Trang, while my youngest daughter born in 2008 bears the name of Lê Tuyển Xuan Nhi. I did this in the hope that it will provide my daughters the knowledge that they, now the family's 12th generation, are a link in an endless chain started by Lê Lai. That is, regardless of their sex, they are now expected to live up to the virtues, carry on the "good name," and value the non-communist heritage of their ancestors (L. Le, 2007b). Effectively, my daughters' engagement with the Vietnamese diasporic community is much earlier and more intensified than mine. For instance, my oldest daughter have gone with her grandparents to the April 30<sup>th</sup> Commemoration of the Fall of Sài Gòn, Vietnamese Tet New Year, the Vietnamese mid-autumn moon festival, and South Việt Nam's Military Day. As a result, my oldest daughter can sing the South Vietnamese national anthem. In 2010, my oldest daughter, who was then in the first grade,



brought home a South Vietnamese national flag that she had made in her art class. She told her art teacher that this was a flag of Việt Nam. After seeing her artwork, I did try to explain to my daughter that the flag symbolizes a cultural heritage that legitimately exists only outside of Việt Nam.



(This South Vietnamese national flag is drawn by my daughter, Lê Tuyên Thu Trang, in 2010.)

And not unlike my father and his father, I am in the process of finding the “address of the present” as a means of connecting my family’s past towards a more hopeful future for Việt Nam. Although my father vowed never to return to Việt Nam, the recovery of my folklife, my teaching and research on Vietnamese experiences have led me to visit Việt Nam on a regular basis. In particular, I developed a faculty-led study abroad in Vietnam since 2005 for both undergraduate and graduate students. Currently, I am figuring out for myself whether I desire or need to carry on the family’s edict, “Choose public servants among those who have leadership and competence,” in Việt Nam. In many ways, I already know the answer, but I haven’t yet figure out how to bridge the non-communist versus communist separation in a way that I would be able to continue my family’s “good name” without “selling out” for financial gains or “apologizing” for the current regime’s claim that Việt Nam has achieved its “evolution” and, thus, no other political movements or “peaceful evolution” can come after Hồ Chí Minh’s revolution. Notwithstanding, I have thought about methods that underlie a potential reconciliation: focusing on salient common demonitors (i.e., being Vietnamese and desiring a sovereign, modern Việt Nam), finding socio-political parallels (i.e., multipartism, respect for human rights, a healthy private sector, and curbing corruption), and seeking best practices (i.e., actual policies that allow each side to see each other as viable partner). Within Vietnam’s current “state capitalism” and “illiberal democracy,” there are spaces emerging where these reconciliatory methods can take place (X. K. Le, 2008). Here, I am reminded of “a pattern that connects” from my grandfather’s lived experience: Whether “working” within the Vietnam Communist Party’s post reform era is the way to bring about a gradual “peaceful evolution?” Or whether “pressuring” the exit of the Vietnam Communist Party is the only way to have “peaceful evolution?”



(Above are my study abroad students presenting and exchanging ideas with Vietnamese college students on the globalization in Việt Nam. This took place at U.S. Embassy's American Center in Hanoi in the summer of 2009.)

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