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**Downloading Heritage: Vietnamese Diaspora Online**

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## **Downloading Heritage: Vietnamese Diaspora Online**

### **Abstract**

Global communication via the Internet has created a bridge across space and time bringing nations and communities into real time interactions. The construction of Internet based communities has opened up a new frontier for negotiating relationships and expressions of culture and identity.

This is demonstrated by looking the transnational/trans-cultural/trans-racial position of Vietnamese orphans who were separated from their country, culture, language and heritage at birth during the Vietnam War. In a humanitarian military exercise known as Operation Babylift, thousands of orphans were evacuated from Vietnam just before the 'fall' of Saigon. As babies they were dispersed across America, Australia, Canada and Europe.

Now young adults, they have recently begun to engage in transnational activism by developing cyber communities to reconcile and reconnect with their origins. This paper will investigate the history of Vietnamese adoption, its consequences and challenges. It will then explore the emerging developments of their Vietnamese identity building replacing tradition, creating a form of "e-heritage".

## **Downloading Heritage: Vietnamese Diaspora Online**

On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1975 President Gerald Ford approved the airlift of thousands of orphans from Vietnam. This was to become known as Operation Babylift. A combination of private and military transport planes began to fly more children out of Vietnam as part of the Babylift. Numbers vary but it appears that at least three thousand children were flown to the United States and approximately one thousand three hundred children were flown to Canada, Europe and Australia' (Martin, 2000).

The airlifts relied on an international effort. Rosemary Taylor, an Australian worked closely with the Friends For All Children from the US as well as a variety of agencies and volunteers from Europe and Australia. She was responsible for overseeing many of the orphans to the airlift. Of her work and the children she supervised Taylor (1998, p15) stated, "There were healthy and handicapped babies; the fully Vietnamese and the mixed-race; the legitimate and the illegitimate! ... These babies came by dozens each month to the already overcrowded orphanages."

Joyce Harrington was an American responsible for supervising many of the babies. 'The U. S. Embassy has put out a call for fifteen to twenty American women with current re-entry visas who are free to escort a planeload of Vietnamese orphans to the U. S' (Harrington, 2000). She was eventually assigned a flight with Holt International personnel who brought her a steady stream of babies and children and loaded them into a departing plane. 'Each one had a white ID band on one arm with its Vietnamese name and case number. On the other arm was a band with the adopting parent's name, matching case number, and color-coded for a final destination of Seattle, Chicago or New York. The final count was 409 orphans, 300 of which were under a year and a half old' (Harrington, 2000).

The evacuations governance was hindered by the chaos of war. There was also a fatal accident. One of the first official government flights of Operation Babylift was struck down. 'A C-5A Galaxy plane - at that time the largest airplane in the world - departed with more than 300 children and adults. Forty miles out of Saigon and 23,000 feet up in the air, an explosion blow off the rear doors of the giant craft (Martin, 2000)'. On April 4 1975 the US military C-5A that crashed took the life of Margaret Moses, an Australian that had come to Vietnam in 1971 to assist fellow Australian Taylor in running nurseries for orphans. Survivors included some of the orphans who have today been found in the US and UK. However, their records on board were destroyed.

Many people in the United States viewed the Galaxy crash as another in a long series of chaotic events surrounding the evacuations. At Tan Son Nhut airport, there was no time to organize within the adoption standards expected today, for the fall of Saigon was near. 'A Pan American Airways Boeing 747 chartered by Holt International that day carried 409 children and 60 escorts, apparently the largest planeload of the Babylift. Reports vary, but it appears that 1200 children were evacuated in the 24 hours following the Galaxy crash, including 40 of the surviving children' (Martin, 2000).

On April 29 Taylor with two other remaining staff and the young adopted daughter of one of them, left Vietnam on one of the last helicopters to take off from the roof of the American Embassy. The Australian government subsequently awarded Taylor the decoration Member of the Order of Australia for the work she accomplished on behalf of the children of Vietnam. She now continues her work with orphans in Thailand. Despite receiving correspondence from the orphans today about their heritage and origins, accurate information and birth records have been difficult to provide.

The children received considerable upon their arrivals to the West. For example, Australian writer Ian Harvey (1980) reported that, "Once the news of the

impending evacuation of Vietnamese children became known in Australia there was a rush of adoption applications". In New South Wales where 14 children were available for open adoption, an astonishing 4,000 applications were mailed out in response to telephone inquiries and 600 were returned.

Many offers were made from reactions of emotion after a dramatic war. 'In the 15 years following Vietnam's unification, only 44 Vietnamese children were adopted by Americans. However, adoptions did resume over time. The United States reopened diplomatic relations with Vietnam in 1995: the number of adoptions from Vietnam to the United States doubled that year. Adoptions continued to increase each year, doubling again in 1998, when 603 children were adopted from Vietnam in the United States' (Martin, 2000).

The most controversial airlift, involved ninety-nine orphans from South Vietnam being evacuated in an operation organized by *Daily Mail* editor David English. For many his motives were more about self-publicity and headline hunting. The airlift became known as a media stunt. British journalist Roy Greensdale (2001) remarked in hindsight, 'the stunt he pulled off in 1975 remains one of the most controversial journalistic enterprises of all time and is the subject of a poignant TV documentary (Orphans of the Airlift) which illustrates the dangers of playing with people's lives.' Greensdale revealed that only fifty-one of the ninety-nine orphans were adopted. The others were sent to special homes and several have never left the Ockendon Venture home to which they were originally consigned.

There have been periodic updates in the Mail defending the mission's virtues. In 1996 a group of seventeen orphans returned, at the Mail's expense, to Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City). In the case of Anna Gough, adopted as a thirteen month-old baby, she reported in a Channel 4 documentary *Orphans of the Airlift* (Channel 4, 2001) that she was grateful for her adoption.

For others, such as in the case of Minh Le, his removal from Saigon proved to be more painful with long lasting consequences. In the case of Le, he was removed from his sister and has failed to find her since their separation in 1975.

Greensdale found many more disturbing stories, such as the life of orphan Long Van La, crippled by polio, forced to spend four years at British orphanage. He was then fostered out to a family where he endured physical abuse, suffered a breakdown at fifteen and spent three years in a home for delinquents.

### **Search for Heritage**

The first generation of adopted Vietnamese that were placed in families became the “generation X” fall-out of the Vietnam War, born around 1975 and living as Westerners. Immersed in their adoptive family’s culture their upbringing was essentially shaped by Western pop-culture and traditions based on Christian theosophy and average white picket fenced suburban rituals. Unlike other Vietnamese migrant youth, adopted Vietnamese did not have much contact with Vietnamese or Asian mentors and authority. They emerged without a sense of being part of the Vietnamese migrant community. A recent survey of individuals adopted from Vietnam through the Holt International Adoption agency reported that most orphans ‘grew up in Caucasian neighborhoods, although some lived in neighborhoods that included Vietnamese and/or other Asians with individuals growing up around other (non-Asian) ethnic backgrounds’ (Lieberthal, 2000 ).

In early childhood most fully accepted that they belonged to their Western families and there are no reports that they felt they were different. One of the fathers of empiricism, Locke, considered a child's mind a blank slate on which were written the experiences the child had during development. Rousseau too believed that the child's mind develops as he or she experiences the world (Locke and Rousseau in Fabes & Martin, 2002). Adoptive parents often stated that they were colorblind to assure their trans-racially adopted children would fit in and feel no differently from a biological child. From my own experience and

interviews with other adopted individuals, adopted children at the earliest stages of development do not differentiate their color or race with that of their adoptive family's.

However, once adopted Vietnamese children reached the schoolyard and wider community, the process of assimilation proved to be difficult. From other children's observations it became realized that they were from a different race. Despite being established in habits inherited post-war from adoptive parents, their genetic appearance classified them as 'the other'. Asian American writer Wu (2001, Ch3. p79) understood this experience as '... everyone with an Asian face who lives in America is afflicted by the perpetual foreigner syndrome. We are figuratively and even literally returned to Asia and ejected from America'.

In some cases mixed race adopted Vietnamese that had African American origins, could often find their identity even more confusing. One adoptee stated, "I am half African American and half Vietnamese, but to almost anyone that sees me, they would think I am just African American...in school, I was discouraged from taking certain classes because of my race (Lieberthal, 2000)".

The consequences of the airlift took began to emerge as the orphans reached maturity. Safi, adopted Vietnamese from the United Kingdom now aged twenty-six revealed a dual struggle of fitting in with her British environment and with her race saying, "I suppose I was quite a mixed up and confused child. I needed a sense of belonging somewhere and I needed to find out who I really was. In my heart I knew I was part of my family in England, but at the back of my mind was my insecurity of who abandoned me and why. I felt "torn between two cultures". I know my life was here in England but I tried to imagine what my life would have been, had I remained in Vietnam (Felce, 2001)".

## Media Heritage

But what Vietnam could be imagined from the adopted Vietnamese western-bred perspectives? 'Important as it is to American, and global, history the reality of the war in Vietnam is far from certain. For the majority of those who attempt to interpret it, their most vivid impressions come not from direct experience but from a strange conglomeration of texts - the memorial on the Mall in Washington, films, first-hand accounts of speakers, friends, or relatives, novels, Neil Sheehan's *New Yorker* articles and prize-winning book, college and high school courses, rhetorical allusions by politicians, archives, microfilm and microfiche, and so on... Was Vietnam after all nothing more than a repetition of a classic Conradian narrative -- a crazed voyage through an exotic jungle in search of an unamenable insane kingdom in the heart of darkness ... Where would one look for the reality of Vietnam? Are recollections of veterans or POWs more real than *Apocalypse Now*? Are the Pentagon Papers? ... PBS documentary... Is that finer reality still buried in an archive somewhere? '(Cousins & Hussain).

For the Western orphans, the most accessible and common representations of what life would have been like in Vietnam were from Hollywood Vietnam War movies. Vietnam via Hollywood was defined culturally and historically as rock'n'roll purple haze of Doors music and napalm. American boys lost in exotic jungles fighting an often invisible or fleetingly shown enemy. When Vietnamese were portrayed they were 'are merely a backdrop for the drama of America confronting itself (O'Nan, S.)'.

Oliver Stone, Stanley Kubrick and Francis Ford Coppola were the most famous directors that defined these images of the Vietnam War through violent and sometimes hauntingly majestic films that defined America's Vietnam. Oliver Stone (2000) wrote on representing Vietnam, 'It almost goes without saying that our national history is written, at least partly, in popular culture. Music, television

(and music television), and -- perhaps especially -- movies, play a large role in shaping perceptions of national history and national identity'.

'In *Apocalypse Now*, arguably the most famous film of the American Vietnam War experience, director Ford Coppola (2001) stated '...my intention was to create a broad, spectacular film of epic action-adventure scale that was also rich in theme and philosophic inquiry into the mythology of war.' The film inspired by Conrad's *Hearts of Darkness* is a narrative about war and insanity but relies on the juxtaposition of Westerners lost in a foreign environment. "Films that reconstruct specific historical events or personae are often particularly compelling simply because these films -- representations of an era removed from actual events of the time -- offer stories that become textbooks for entire generations' (MacKey-Kallis, 1996).

### **Heritage In Transition**

The emergence of a mature voice from the adopted Vietnamese Diaspora with strong expressions of wanting to explore their history led to a new discourse of Vietnam and the American Vietnam War experience. This was partly enabled by some of the adoption agencies that were part of Operation Babylift in 1975 that organized reunions for the children they brought over. The Holt Adoption Agency was responsible for 30% of the Operation Babylift evacuations/adoptions and held the largest reunion of adopted Vietnamese war orphans on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Vietnam War's end and the date of their airlift.

Stacy, an adopted Vietnamese living in Colorado, USA wrote in an email to me after the reunion "The Reunion gave of us the opportunity to hear success stories of adoptees who travelled back to our mother land and found their biological families. This helped me to decide that it was time to search for my biological mother and journey back to Vietnam, (Meredith, S. T.: 2000)".

The reunions proved that there was a disparity in representations and information about the adopted Vietnamese experience and it was information the adopted Vietnamese were eager to share. The faceless, nameless Vietnamese or Charlie's in Vietnam War movies became potential birth parents, sisters or brothers, grandparents and other relatives. Maybe even relatives who survived and could be found. Images in documentaries and news reportage of the 1970s of voiceless baby victims being loaded onto planes now could be updated to young adults, with opinions about their evacuation from Vietnam and adopted into non-Asian families in the West.

Following the reunions in famous historical sites such as the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, the adoptees returned to their homes spread across the United States and abroad and the discussions moved to the Internet. An online convergence of parallel experiences grew rapidly. Hundreds of emails were exchanged and soon regular e-discussions about adoptions from Vietnam were crossing borders from America where the reunions originated out to reach other adopted Vietnamese based in Australia, Canada and Europe.

In the process of networking with the adopted Vietnamese community I received an email that exemplifies the logical reasons for expanding the reunions into cyber communities. It stated, "I have a friend who was born in Vietnam during the war and came to Australia when she was 14 months old. She was told that the records from the place where she was were all burnt, so she has always thought that she could not find out anything about her past and this has caused her to be very depressed. She knows what her Vietnamese name is and the name of the place where she was before she came here, and she has asked me if I can help her to try to find out about "who she is" through the Internet" (Williams, Per Comm 2002)

Although the enquiring person is based in Australia, her dilemma shares much in common with an international group of adoptees based throughout US and Europe. Many orphans even came from the same orphanage and were put on the same evacuating plane but then were distributed out across continents. Her questions about if the orphanage was destroyed might be easily answered by adoptees who have already explored this or by the 1975 adoption workers who returned to the West after the War or who have returned to Vietnam. The answer to “who she is” or what is her past might be found today on the Internet without her having to travel away from her computer. Individuals who were adopted from Vietnam or adults who worked as nurses, adoption agency administrators or soldiers during the war have also begun to surf the net, build websites and join egroups.

The Internet has made it possible to transcend national frontiers and converge our definitions of identity and issues away from national constraints. Making initial online enquiries is also discreet and less confronting. And although the statistics are low, it has also become a potential way for adopted Vietnamese to search for their birth parents. Demonstrating the transnational position of adopted Vietnamese, I received an email from an adoptee living in Belgium who was searching for her birth mother. I emailed her search a former nun who lives in America and was part of Operation Babylift. The nun, who regularly returns to Vietnam found the adoptees birth mother and emailed me in Australia to let me know. The online collaboration resulted in her finding her birth mother.

In *Apocalypse Now* there is a spectacular scene where Robert Duvall has led a formation of helicopters over to Nha Trang beach (to the soundtrack of Wagner) in order to see a Californian GI surf. Copola's Vietnam has created a surreal scene with American surfers invading a Vietnamese beach. When his platoon argues that the place is too dangerous, that it is “Charlie's” territory (the nickname for the Viet Cong), Duvall's character defiantly shouts over the bombs and bullets, “Well Charlie don't surf!” Duvall won an Oscar nomination for his

performance and its unforgettable line, "I love the smell of napalm in the morning." His emptiness is frightening: A surfing fanatic, he agrees to the attack only to liberate a beach said to offer great waves ("Charlie don't surf"). (Ebert, 1999).

Internet technologies, the initial frontier of the white, male dominated culture of computer scientists, engineers and teenage gamers glued to their keyboards has also opened a gateway to minorities. "Internet technology is a technology that democratizes and decentralizes more so than any other media currently available (Thomas, Hoffman, Venkatesh, 2000)". This includes e-democracy for 'Charlie' too. Today, cyber communications and daily 'surfing the net' fits in with the adopted Vietnamese War generation's dominant form of communication.

A recently funded project found that about three-quarters of Asian-American adults have gone online, a significantly greater rate than the 58 percent of white adults, the 50 percent of Hispanic adults and the 43 percent of African-American adults who have done so. Not only are Asian Americans the most experienced group of Internet users in the United States, but they are also one of the Internet's youngest online groups. Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of Asian-American Internet users are between the ages of 18 and 34. (Internet & American Life Project, 2001). These statistics show an optimum environment for the adopted Vietnamese to reach the race and age group they belong to.

Cinema, as well as television, radio and print, still offers us a way to culturally express our issues, explore our history and narrate aspects of our Vietnam War experience. However the transition of this media and other information to the Internet has shifted control to the adopted Vietnamese to develop their own representations of their Vietnam War realities and narratives.

## Downloading heritage - Challenges

From the evacuation from Saigon to Western nations, untold narratives are being posted from many different cities and countries. The adoptee social networks have been formed through communication (emails, egroups, posts, instant messages) and developed into a community, or virtual communities that encourages solidarity, collectivity and association. Writer Said who has long focused on formerly colonized people's struggles for justice and voice recently wrote, "Real cultures are plural, diverse and dynamic. They contain movement and opposition. They also contain ample bases for communication across national and group boundary lines." (Said in Nussbaum, 2001).

Despite the different citizenships and the racial diversity, a sense of Diaspora links members identifying as an adopted Vietnamese. The new conditions and public sphere adopted Vietnamese use in cyberspace is well suited to building kinship and solidarity. This is enhanced by the new speed and scale of globalization and Internet technology. Members of the adopted Vietnamese community are pursuing common goals and the creation of a collective history is slowly developing into heritage.

Anthropologist Appadurai (2000) asks, "What are the emerging forms of kinship, social solidarity, and personal attachment in a world where families cross continents, where friendships are made and broken on the Internet, and where political crises and labor markets divide neighbors and friends? Human beings still make life meaningful through their intimate experiences and proximate expectations but under new conditions of speed and scale. What are these new conditions doing to the reproduction of intimacy and the sense of cultural stability on which we all depend?"

Recent websites dedicated issues relating to adoption from Vietnam and community building include:

Operation Babylift created in California – [www.operationbabylift.com](http://www.operationbabylift.com)

The Intercountry Adoptee Support Network (ICASN) based in Australia – [www.icasn.org](http://www.icasn.org)

The Vietnamese Adoptee Network (VAN) based in NY- [www.van-online.org](http://www.van-online.org)

Mam Non created in Michigan – [www.mamnon.org](http://www.mamnon.org)

And my own site

Adopted Vietnamese International (AVI) based in Sydney but with a team volunteers across three continents and volunteer translators of three different languages – [www.adoptedvietnamese.org](http://www.adoptedvietnamese.org)

Appadurai's question for the adopted Vietnamese community relates largely to authenticity. Authenticity for adopted Vietnamese relies on first hand experiences and knowledge that the authors or 'webmasters' are truly individuals who are adopted from Vietnam. Traditional media on Vietnam War experiences relating to the adopted Vietnamese has been from the outside, documented and speculated over by the media, academics, social workers or parents.

The online emergence of adopted Vietnamese voices includes Operation Babylift.com created by Justin Miller who came out in 1975 and was adopted by a Californian family. The VAN website is maintained by a group of Operation Babylift adoptees based in New York and networked with others across the United States. ICASN is managed by Lynelle Beveridge who was adopted from Vietnam in 1973 into a Melbourne family in Australia. My own website, AVI, is based in Sydney with a team of international online volunteers. I was adopted from Vietnam in 1972.

The remaining website is authored by a Linh Lam, a Vietnamese American whose family have adopted from Vietnam. Mam Non was started in 1999 to support the Vietnamese adoption community. Lam was introduced to the community after her parents adopted her younger brother; the first Vietnamese-

Americans to adopt from northern Vietnam. After many meetings, dinners, and picnics they realized there was a great need for Vietnamese cultural resources. “Adopting families were concerned about racism, reception to the greater Vietnamese community, and ways to incorporate their children's Vietnamese legacy into an American identity. It was also becoming obvious that there were some overlapping issues faced by adoptees and Vietnamese-Americans.” The organization is based in Ann Arbor, Michigan (Lam, L: 1999).

After meetings with AVI and VAN in August 2000, she expanded the website focus to include information for older first generation of adopted Vietnamese which includes Asian American readings and academic resources. This has helped close the gap between downloading our own heritage – the hybrid life of being Asian in a non-Asian family and becoming closer to the Vietnamese Diaspora.

The connection to Vietnamese nationals however, has remained elusive and content from birth parents is minimal. This is partly because of a digital divide existing in many developing countries. In 1997 only 15,000 of Vietnam's 78 million people were Internet subscribers, and about half of those were foreigners. In more recent years attention on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) policies and projects are increasingly important to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). The ISP market is only just now opening up to allow for private sector ownership. There were previously only five ISPs in Vietnam. By 2001 Internet use had climbed to 150,000-180,000 subscribers however this is still comparatively low to Vietnam's population. (Tipton, 2001).

While technological advancements and further liberalization of the ICT sector in Vietnam develop, there is also a need to find language translation software from English to Vietnam. Many adopted Vietnamese do not speak Vietnamese. The 2000 survey of adopted Vietnamese at the Holt Adoption agency reunion found only 28% of individuals surveyed had learnt their birth language. (Lieberthal,

2000). The digital divide is narrowing but for now, most communication between the adopted Vietnamese and Vietnamese nationals relies upon the assistance of people who can access the Internet then take that information, translate it and deliver it to the target audience.

This is where adopted Vietnamese heritage is distinct from the larger Vietnamese Diaspora. The adopted Vietnamese negotiations of culture are from a unique identity – predominantly Western fragmented by Asian origins. Longings of the homeland are imagined and created. Narratives of experience are only just emerging. A collective heritage is in its early stages of development.

## **Conclusion**

With multi media technologies like DVDs, CD-ROMs, Video Streaming and the increase in bandwidth develop, the tools to build heritage for the adopted Vietnamese have created electronic experiences. The adopted Vietnamese identity is constantly being constructed and negotiated through an interface. Under the category of 'Adopted from Vietnam' the community is consolidated. But under this category, the formation of identity is continuously in progress. As some of the first generation adoptees are moving to work and live in Vietnam, and learn the language, the Western heritage of adopted Vietnamese becomes closer to a hybrid Vietnamese one. And as bridges across the digital divide are made, a new opportunity for the unheard voices of birth mothers who placed their children in orphanages, the Vietnamese youth who are our peers and the culture, language and traditions of every day life in Vietnam can become integrated into our heritage.

The technology of the digital space offers these participants unprecedented possibilities for communicating and for building self-representations influenced by multiple locations. For some the e-frontiers of the Internet opened up gateways to color blind environments and anonymity as a means to empowerment. For the

adopted Vietnamese, it has empowered them with a new blank cyber-canvas to create and capture color and identity.

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