



# Our Time: why to qué (Y2K)

Stories of Migration and Reconstruction  
from the AsAmSt 223L Asians in the U.S.

Fall 2000 class



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# Introduction

Presented in this volume is a collage of migration stories. More specifically, it is a collection of authentic vignettes that represents the truth about the assimilation experiences of Asian immigrants. Dating back from the final years of their homeland to the present days in the United States, these poignant stories illustrate how each individual journey is important and valuable. They are valuable because each individual presents a clear example of their history.

Each individual story is important. Throughout this compilation, a variety of voices will be heard. These voices are original and simple and offer a significant perspective on many of the issues and questions that Asian immigrants continue to reflect upon and face everyday. As refugees, newcomers, and immigrants, beginning to build a new home and to reconstruct their identities and communities, many are confronted with difficult challenges. These experiences address struggles of adjusting to a new place, rebuilding families, and searching for a cultural identity within their community.

By sharing these thoughtful, personal stories, these students have had the opportunity both to observe how they view their own culture and the ways in which they express their views. Each story is unique, sincere, and genuine, and each story is from the heart. They address fear, devastation, isolation, loneliness, loss, love, freedom. These voices are of migrating, adjusting, and simply fitting in in this new land called America.

# Introductory Comments

by Saurikhane Konekeo

This anthology focuses on the lives of young men and women as they reflect about their past and present. Produced by a group of students from the Asian American Studies class Asians in the U.S. at the University of Massachusetts Boston, this anthology is to serve many functions. Primarily, it is to be used as a resource, a tool to understand experiences through storytelling. This is the students' voice. In addition, it is to connect the audience to a story, to a familiar face. The anthology is also intended for students who became a part of this project to share interesting and colorful experiences about their lives. This was especially rewarding, because they learned from each other that many cultures are similar and different in so many ways. That is, we do not realize how similar our backgrounds are until we begin to share them. Collected here are their poignant tales as these young men and women adopt their new homeland while trying to remember their forsaken country. To some, it is about the American Dream - to be free - while to many, it is about having control of their lives.

They are refugees, newcomers, and immigrants. As they struggle to rebuild and establish bright futures, at the same time, they are also proud of their immigrant/refugee experiences. I can tell that these young men and women wanted to tell their stories. As I read on, the recollection became more animated and their stories full of life. Remembering the discrimination she experienced, Vineeta Samial, a very opinionated and proud woman, explained about the occasions when she was ignored because of her gender and race. "I felt so inferior and

voiceless,” described Vineeta about her rage. Or when Sarah Chu recalled the first time she encountered racism at the age of six years old with her father: “I was in the car with my father when we got lost. We finally found someone on the street and kindly asked for directions (my father asked in English). The white man replied, “ I don’t understand Chinese!” Being a young girl, I was confused.”

These are the retelling of stories, reclaiming what they have learned from their cultures. For instance, Hsiao Pan interviewed a Vietnamese fellow student and asked him what was shocking about the American culture: “One day, he was talking to his younger sister and his sister talked back to him. He felt that his sister disrespected him, and in a rage, he slapped her across the face. The next day, his sister’s teacher noticed a red mark on her face and asked her about it. His sister did not think twice and told the truth. Then two social workers came into their house and tried to find out what was going on. The social worker warned him and told him that if this kind of situation happens again, they’ll have to do something about it next time. He was shocked to learn this and did not understand why they bother to intervene in the family’s matter.” It is about family upbringing, respecting your elders, where men are in charge, because this is what they were brought up to believe. Other students told about their times in the refugee camps, at sea trying to make it to shore, or what they had to do and to sacrifice in order to be together again. Like in the case of Tat Fu Yen’s story where his family was separated for years:

“My migration started in 1981 when my father received a job offering from the Four Seas restaurant in the Chinatown area of Boston. This was his big chance to bring his family over to the United States and live a better life. My father started working as soon as he arrived in America. Because he did not have enough money to rent a place to live, he asked the manager of the Four Seas restaurant if he could live upstairs of the restaurant. This is how my father saved his income and brought the entire family to America.” A few students talked about their first time seeing snow and their first experience of Christmas. Some even began to see a bright future for themselves and their families when they began to talk about getting the best education or buying a house.

This is an important documentation to record stories such as these migration/refugee tales. More so, this is important because these are their experiences of their new life in America, building new families and searching for cultural identity.

The most important consideration in making the selections has been from the input of Outtara Ly, Miao Zhu, and Giau Tran. In close collaboration with Outtara, Miao, and Giau, we were able to meticulously label what would be the clear objective of this publication by stating our goals. *This publication is to convey authentic voices of refugee and immigrant migration, and the stories cover a range of themes including assimilation, racism, cultural identity, reconstructing community, family, and the refugee experience.* This involved frequent meetings concerning everything from conception to editorial decisions and final formatting. It was their thoughtful input to suggest how long this would be, which stories to select, and how much editing was to be done with the stories. The decision to not change the themes was their doing. Placing the stories within the themes is to assist the reader in what to expect. Thus, carefully, one by one, we read the stories



and, with a fine-tooth comb, selected the stories that were not too similar and that were clearly the most interesting and alive for our readers to enjoy and learn from.





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*Part One:*  
*Stories of Migration*



## Wing Fan

This is a story about Heay Heang. This is her story and her family's story about her memories of the war in Cambodia. The conflict between the Cambodian Nationalism and the Communist Khmer Rouge started in the early 1970s. This bloody conflict brought massive destruction to the cities and the citizens of Cambodia. Heay Heang's father, who was a military officer, knew in order for his family to be safe, they must leave their home. Immediately, they left everything behind and relocated to a camp on the northern border of Cambodia and Thailand. It was called *Khao-I-Darg* Camp and it became their new home. Eventually, this camp was Heay's birthplace. Heay was born on September 28, 1979.

After a few years, the *Khao-I-Darg* camp got increasingly dangerous. It was no longer safe for Heay's family. Because of the unsafe conditions, Heay's family moved to a less dangerous and less crowded campsite. For the next ten years, Heay Heang and her family shifted from campsite to campsite along the Cambodian border. Somehow, she was not aware of the war around her. Once in the camps, the war seemed so far away from them. Most importantly, her family was together; they had enough food to eat and they were healthy. But they can't live in the camps forever. Soon enough, the Heang family would move again.

With the assistance of the Maryland Church in Horsehead, New York, Heay's father applied for a war refugee status to the United States for the entire family. The application and the procedures took over a year for the final approval and consideration for Heang's family. It was their dream come true.

On December of 1987, the Heang family arrived in Horsehead, N. Y.

To welcome the Heang family; father (Sok Chor), mother (Heang Loun), older sister (Heyp Heang), Heay, younger sister (Hoeun Heang) and a younger brother (Hing Heang), were Jack and Elly Leiser. The Leiser belonged to the Maryland Church. They were very humble and supportive people. They helped and made certain that Heay and her family felt comfortable and ready to make their new home in America. One of the memorable experiences that Heay can recall was her first Christmas celebration in the United States. It wasn't just about receiving gifts and toys from her new American friends, but it was the feeling of freedom, security, and possibilities to succeed in this new country. It was such a joy for Heay, to be able to feel snow for the first time.

Wanting to feel in control of their lives, the Heang family decided that they must do things for themselves. Heay's mother and father enrolled in an adult education program in ESL classes. After mastering the basics of the English language, Sok Chor was able to secure a job at an assembling line at Whitewesting House appliances.

Because of the large settlement of Cambodians throughout the United States, the Heay family decided to move to the southwest region of the United States, Fresno, California. There in Fresno, the Heay family lived for seven years. In 1996, the Heay family moved again. This time they moved to Lowell, Massachusetts. They moved to Lowell, MA for several reasons. They moved to Lowell because there were many Cambodians living along the Merrimack River, the job market was booming, and an important and major Buddhist temple was located in Lowell.



Every migration story is different and most of them have something in common. The significant commonality is that there is always a move. For example, the Heay family moved so many times. Because of this constant move, families are not able to maintain social stability and lasting friendship. A holistic society is needed, as well as social networks. That is close friend who can help. This is not only a problem for refugees but also to immigrants. Now I understand and respect all the refugees. They are truly resilient. Their stories remind me everyday not to give up. I am an emigrant to the United States but my parents are refugees from China. I now understand their pain and listen to their stories.

## Chuong Nguyen

### *Many Days on the Ocean*

After the Vietnam War, the country suffered for another 25 or more years. Innocent families tried to escape for freedom while thousands of people have put their lives over seas and in many other risky ways. This is a short story of my personal life. Many fishermen and their families had planned to escape for freedom but some were frightened of the Viet Cong. They were the beach police officers. Secondly, the weather often changed dramatically and was even unpredictable at times. Lastly, many of the boats experienced turmoil on land and water. Many of the boats sank to the ocean floor. Smaller boats carrying 25-35 people were absolutely dangerous. It was too much weight on the boats. These were some of the news we heard during that year.

During a hot summer day in July of 1989, another boat had crossed the ocean. This was the boat that I was on. There were 25 people on the boat, 18 children and 7 adults. Because the boat was so small, this made us feel uneasy. Small boats with so many passengers were extremely dangerous. On this boat, there were 5 families and three small orphans. I was one of the orphans. Even though we were all relatives and cousins, there's no one better than your own mother and father.

The 25 of us sailed the ocean for almost thirty long days, and occasionally stopping from place to place for food and water. Everywhere we stopped people loved us and gave us plenty of food and water. Some were generous enough to give us money and clothes when we needed them. Families even

asked if they could adopt some of the little children. I knew it was not going to be me because I didn't look healthy and attractive enough. These families spoke fluent Vietnamese even though they lived in China for many years. I heard they did not make it to Hong Kong for some reason and they gave up. But they didn't want to go back to Vietnam to live under the Communist. So China was not a bad place for them to be.

During our journey for freedom, we also stopped by a fisherman's port for food and direction. They were kind and hospitable. Our boat was getting weaker from the heavy wear and tear of traveling. The only word we could say to the people in China and the fishermen was "*Huong Cang*" for direction. Although we both struggled with the language, we were able to use jesters with our hands and fingers. They even drew us a map. And of course we used the compass and the sun but that was not enough.

On the fifteenth day, we were hit by a fairly strong storm. Luckily we were very close to land. If we had been out too far in the middle of the ocean we would probably be dead, baits for the fish. To keep the boat floating, all of us had to help. We made sure that there wasn't enough water in the boat. We had to drain the water back into the ocean. The boat was filthy with ocean water. So we made it back to land again and waited for the storm to stop. We were wet and very cold. Happy to see that the storm died, we continued to head back to the ocean but this time move along the land.

We finally made it to Hong Kong and about 1/2 mile away we noticed another family of four headed for the same direction as us. As we approach them, then I remembered that we have met them sailing on the ocean. The family were in a small round (bucket) with no engine just the sail, something big enough just for two men. They were starving and the children were sleeping. Immediately we gave them some food and pulled them in with a rope.

Hong Kong's gate was close so I think this is about 1986. The gates are closed because of the many boats entering the country. But they still had some room for us to live temporarily until they begin to interview. We stayed in a house on an island in the middle of the nowhere. I didn't know what that island was called but I did remember the Vietnamese name for the island. It was called "*Dao Bo*" or "*Dao Ruoi*". In English *Dao* means island, *Bo* means cow, while *Ruoi* means fly. There were many cows and flies all over the island. I have seen them all.

Fighting still continued between South and North Vietnam. The head of the department on the island separated people from the north from those of the south and we ended up living on a huge ship. It housed about 20-30 families. They moved us to the camps and required us all to have a physical test. For the prevention of a disease called A-Chau, we had to get shots. Lots of people that were there before us still lived there. There were all kinds of interview. We moved around to seven different camps before we were settled in a camp called "*San Nhat*." The "*San Nhat*" camp was safe and we were allowed to go in and out with a proper ID at daytime. Before "*San Nhat*" was for both North and South Vietnamese but because of the fighting, it became primarily for Southern Vietnamese only. I lived there with my relatives for six months

and then moved to “*Tuyen Mun*.” Then four months later they called me up for a final interview.

The four months in the camp was horrible. I had to sell drugs and buy drugs for some gang member in the camp. I was force to do it. I was not afraid or felt bad at the time but when I look back, I felt bad about it. One month later from the interviewing day, I saw my name on the list of paper that was going to the United States. I was so happy, every night I had dream how beautiful America is. Living in big building in my own room and especially having my own refrigerator for ice cream. My dream was like Disney land, the world of peace. But it turns out differently. Instead the houses were so small and I had to share a room with other people. Kansas was the state where I first arrived and this reminded of Vietnam, crops, flatland, etc. It was nice.

I know there are suffering immigrants in the United States and all over. But nothing compares to the ordeal that some have suffered during the Vietnam War. I think as an immigrant in any country, there will always be prejudice and hate among human beings will continue.

## Miao Na Zhu

### *Influenced Mind*

My name is Miao. I came to the United States in October of 1995. It was the first time that my family reunited in a long while. This particular event does not seem complex but it was a huge influence in my life. In those years that we were a part, I was able to really reflect and think about my own life. I did not want my family to separate. I wanted us to be together when it was our time to go to the United States. It was either leave together or stay in China together. I just didn't want to be separated from my parents. People who have never been separated from their parents would never fully understand. For me it was an emotional time that words could not describe.

My mother came to the United States in 1992. During three years of separation, my sisters and I lived with my grandma's family. After living with them in their village for few months, we moved into the city. Even though we lived in the city, we would make frequent visits to the village. We missed the village. It felt like home. I had memorable feelings when I went back for visits, but always felt sad when I saw our golden colored cat. I treated her like a family member. Every time when she would meow and purr, I always felt she was very similar to humans. Many times I would meow back at her. My mom thought I was silly for doing that to a cat, but I didn't mind what she said and continued to talk the cat. I knew we didn't understand each other, but I still did it anyway. I hoped I had magic and could understand her meaning, so that I could really talk to her, like the cartoon show on television.

After we lived with our relatives, the cat became lonely except for the times we went to visit. She had little kittens, but my mom abandoned them and let them loose to become wild cats or gave them to other families who wanted them. It was because one family only needed one cat; it was not necessary to waste food on raising cats. My sisters and I begged my mom to keep the cute kittens. Unsuccessful at our attempt to save the kittens, we just felt sorry for them. The mother cat was so pitiful and the poor thing was completely neglected. She wasn't even fed. How is she supposed to find food to survive? She had to hunt for her food. During another visit, we were told that the cat was dead. I was sad and shocked. I wished I had taken care of that cat. She would still be alive. At the same moment, I realized how similar I was to that cat. I felt I was abandoned and didn't know what would happen to me. I really wanted to cry for the cat and myself. We were almost equally pitiful except my sister and I were in the care of our relatives. I was not happy at all living with my relatives. I disliked seeing my cousins and their parents living together. I was so envious when I heard them calling, "Mom and Dad." I knew my relatives cared about us too, but I couldn't stop thinking about my parents. Before the separation with my mother, we were separated from my father in 1985. I was a little girl then and didn't have strong feelings about the separation because we were still living with my mom. But at this time, we were separated from both parents. We knew that we wouldn't see my mom

for years. We had no idea when the reunion day would come. Sometimes, I missed them and would often cry. Every time when I cried, I would think of our dead cat and her kittens and then I would cry harder.

When my uncle returned from Australia in 1993, I felt so complex. I should be happy, but I wasn't. After saying hello to him, I went into our bedroom and cried. The reason was unknown to me. At the same time, I wanted my uncle to notice me so that he could comfort me. How could I make him realize that I was crying? Finally, I had an idea. I decided to play music, songs that I learned in school, with my flute. As I expected, my uncle came in after me. When he saw that I was crying, he asked what song I was playing to cheer and to praise me. He wanted me to stop crying. He had no idea why I was crying. I didn't know the reason either, but I realized seeing my uncle reminded me of my mother and how much I miss her. Another reason was that I wanted someone to notice how unhappy I was. When I see my uncle, it reminds me of my mom. Once my uncle knew of our condition, he talked to my parents and told them to find a better lawyer to help us. We needed to be with our parents. I was glad that there was someone who understood us.

Finally, we had our visas and my mom would come back to bring us to the United States with her. We knew we would have our own home again. Since I missed my mom so much, I thought I would have so many things to say to her. Instead, I felt complex again. I stayed in our bedroom. While in the room, I was thinking about how my mom looked and what I could say to her. I didn't really want to see her. It is hard when you don't see each other for three years. What are you suppose to say and how are you supposed to act?? Writing to each other and sending pictures were the ways we communicated. In the letters,



three of us always said that we missed my parents; we wanted see them soon; we hoped we could meet them in the United States as soon as possible. Then how come I don't have the strength to see my mother? I just stayed in the room until the doorbell rang, I came out and saw my mom. She didn't change much. She was happy and there were tears in her eyes. I wanted to cry too, but I held back my tears. She called our names, and then I called her back naturally. After that, I didn't know what to say and all I could do was listen to her. It really took a while to break my silence. Then, I started to ask her many questions about America. I wondered about the new life there. I thought it would be wonderful that our family would live together finally. I also wished our cat to have a better life in heaven. I wished her life could change to a better one as mine did.

Right now, I am happy that I live with my parents. I know the separation between a parent and child is not good. I used to feel sad without knowing why; I always tried to make other people pay more attention to me; I wanted them to know that I really needed someone who cared for me, as my parents would do. There were many happiness and sadness that I just wanted to share with my parents, but they were not with me at that time, and this really influenced me a lot.

## Mai Han Vo

The most significant experience of my life has been the emigration of my family from Vietnam to America. In 1995, the American government granted my family visas to enter the United States. As I sat on the airplane, I felt a strong sense of loss as we got farther and farther away from our homeland. When I landed in America, despite the freedom, my family faced many challenges, especially with the language barrier. But I was willing to start all over because I was no longer living under the Communists.

The Communists captured my father in 1975 after the Vietnam War. This was the beginning of many difficulties that my family would face under the Communist government. I had grown up and worked without the love, the protection and the guidance of a father. Everyday my mother and I worked and cultivated the land to supply food during the time my father was away. Living under the Communist rule, I could not join any clubs with my friends in school. They did not let me join because of my father's occupation. My father was a police officer who had worked for the old government. Therefore, I was considered a bad influence. The statement "your father is a traitor," was harsh for me to hear. This statement hurt me not because I was ashamed of the fact that my father worked for the South Vietnamese, but because the Communists took away our freedom and peaceful lives.

Life became challenging for everyone during that time. Many thousands of Vietnamese people escaped after 1975 by boats. I could hardly imagine how many died in the Pacific Ocean. Those who could not escape were put in "re-education

camps.” My father was one of them. The Communists had dealt some kind of punishment to those Vietnamese living in South Vietnam. For example, my aunt wanted to be a teacher and because my father was her brother, she could not achieve her goals. The status they assigned on my aunt’s exam was relative to “*nguy*”, a term used by the Communists to classify people who worked for the old government. Therefore students didn’t have a chance to get into any university no matter how talented and diligent they were. Sadness and depression caused my aunt to become an ascetic. Until now, I did not know what my future would hold if I could not get to America.

Coming from Vietnam, I hardly knew any English. Even when I knew what to say on a bus or in store, no one understood me and I had to repeat and repeat what I was trying to say. I can still remember my first day in High School, looking at all the students who were talking in the new language. I felt so lost as I stood in this strange world. I looked around, trying to find my own close friends, but I realized that I had left them all behind in my country. I sat quietly and I felt that I could not “fit in” with this new environment. Everyday at lunch was like a punishment to me. Other students who spoke English fluently stared and giggled at me when I carried my lunch tray to a table. Something was missing in me. I felt nothing but emptiness inside. I lost everything, my homeland, my grandparents, and my close friends, people I grew up with and a community that I was part of. I still remember vividly when I cried and told my father that I wanted to go back to Vietnam after the first day of school. I just burst into tears like a baby. But the most

important thing is that I know that I have my father. I also have my confidence and I know that I am Vietnamese. The ability to overcome hardship, to face fear and succeed is in my blood. I think we have always made the best of any bad situation, to be resilient. I was raised to be strong and do the same. So I threw myself into school and I survived.

Experiencing pain is common among human beings. I am proud of what I have accomplished. I worked and overcame the hardships of my life. Because of the values and morals that I have learned and cherished, I become more independent and confident and I can stand proud.

## Manling Chen

Immigrants come to America for many reasons. They journey to America for freedom, to practice their own religious belief and to have better lives. The image of America is a place where people can make their dreams come true. My family came to the United States to seek a better life and better education for the children.

One day in middle school in China, a classmate of mine, Bao, announced that she was going to America. This was to happen in a few days. Many months later, I received a letter from Bao. She described America as wide and pretty. To me, this was an indication that anyone can make his or her dreams come true. After learning about the American way of life from Bao, and anxious as I was, I asked my mother whether we had a chance of going to America. Besides, my grandfather has been in America for forty years as a paper son. So this should be a clear sign that my family would have an opportunity to go to America. Finally good news arrived from my mother. My uncle in America started the application process for us to go to America.

Meanwhile I was very determined to study English. I spent the next two years learning English. I learned a lot of basic conversation phrases, but this was not enough. At the end of 1994, the consulates finally processed our application form, thus declaring our permit to America. Finally we were on a plane heading towards America and had to transfer in California. We were at the airport for almost four hours. I felt very strange. As a stranger in a strange country, I felt very helpless in the airport. There were no Chinese-speaking

passengers. Even when the hostess asked me “stand by”, I didn’t have a clue what those words meant. Suddenly, this white lady next to me noticed that we looked like the new immigrants on the block, so she talked to me slower.

After everything was calmer, my family began our new lives in America. Because they lack the necessary skills and didn’t speak English, my parents worked at a Chinese factory and super market as cheap labor. They worked more than 50 hours a week; and worked harder than others did. To improve her skills, my mother also took an English course at night at a local learning center in Chinatown. She hoped one day to pass the citizenship interview, to be a part of America. My sister and I continued our education at a high school located in Charlestown. I can recall my first day of high school. There were so many new faces around me. I sat quietly like a dried shrimp in the back corner. I didn’t dare speak any English, not even a simple word. The following day I mailed a letter at the post office. This was the first time that I realized that I was treated differently because I didn’t know English well enough. I asked the post office worker if I could buy a 60-cent stamp. Apparently, the man didn’t hear me clearly. He asked me what I needed by staring at me with his mean eyes. He started getting angry and yelling at me, *do you understand English?* I didn’t know what to say, my voice got lower and lower. I realized if I wanted to survive in this society, I must speak English well in order to communicate with others. If you don’t speak English in this country, you’ll run into some problems. I didn’t speak too much English in high school until I got to college. In high school, most of my schoolmates were Chinese and typically, we spoke our common language. While in college, it was very different. We have to communicate to each other in English. After some

time I was able to understand what the professor was talking about in class, even though I didn't speak well.

It's said when a person suffers the hardships; he must be an outstanding human being. Immigrants struggle and try to survive well in this society. Although they face discrimination, racism and are treated as cheap labor, they try their best to contribute to society and never give up. To me time is the only witness. I am proud of all the immigrants. Moreover, I am proud of us, being a part of all immigrants.

## Sarah Chu

My story is totally different compared to the rest of the class who shared their own experiences. My parents didn't have a tough time coming to the U.S. Unlike the refugees, they weren't forced to be out of their country. They came to the U.S. because they were scared of China taking over Hong Kong in 1997.

All of my paternal relatives were living in the U.S. and one of my uncles sponsored my parents. They entered the U.S. without conflicts in 1978 and resided in Maine. My parents made a living by opening a Chinese restaurant with two of my father's friends. My mom helped my father out by working as a cashier and bartender.

I want to describe Maine a little before continuing on with the story. During the 1970s and early 80s, there were no Asians living in the neighborhood where my parents resided. All of them were Americans. Obviously, the only Chinese restaurant in Maine was the one that my father and his friends owned.

After two years, my sister and I came to this world. Since there were no Asians, all my friends were Americans. They were nice people and didn't treat me differently because of my race. I went to a regular kindergarten where I was the only minority in the class.

My parents didn't have a hard time assimilating to the U.S. They learned English through high school in Hong Kong. Therefore, they could carry on a normal conversation in English (broken in a way).



I first encountered racism when I was 6 years old. I was in the car with my dad but we were lost. We finally found someone on the street and KINDLY asked for directions (my father asked in English). The White man replied, "I don't understand Chinese!" Being a young girl, I was confused. First of all, my father did not ask him in Chinese. Did that man have a hearing problem? I wanted to ask my father about this odd behavior but I did not because my father was angry at that point.

After 6 years, my father and his friends sold the restaurant and then moved to Boston. We lived with my paternal relatives. I heard from most of the people who shared their migration stories that extended family was a great source to seek help. In this case, my relatives didn't help us at all. We were on our own. The only thing they offered was shelter but my mother paid for it too. When my mother tried to apply for a job at John Hancock's, my aunt said, "YOU NEED TO KNOW ENGLISH TO WORK THERE!" I can't believe those words came out of her mouth. I'm unhappy if those words came out of a stranger's mouth but I was ANGRY because she said it. I thought extended family should help each other out through struggles, but NO!! All my relatives LOVE to criticize my family and to put us down. I was glad that my mother received an offering from John Hancock and this sealed my relatives' mouths.

Another 6 years passed and my mother saved enough money to rent an apartment. I was SO happy to leave. We

moved to the South End where a lot of Asians lived. My parents were happy in this neighborhood because there were others who shared their language, interests, etc. On the other hand, I was happier in Maine because people (Americans) in my neighborhood didn't give me looks. In Chinatown, Asians gave me the weirdest look and I still cannot figure out the reasons behind it. I have yellow skin and black hair too.

Again, my parents didn't have a tough time adjusting their lives in America. They picked up everything quickly. My parents have low expectations and that explained why they didn't have a huge problem. They do think about their own country, but after being here for 20 plus years, everything is stable, so they don't have the intention of going back. Most importantly, my sister, brother and I were born in the U.S. We don't have a clue what Hong Kong is like and we can't live there anyway. I told my parents that I would like to visit Hong Kong but will not live there. I am having a hard time dealing with Asians in Chinatown. The population in Hong Kong is more than 90% Asians and I don't know what I will do then. My mother is still working in John Hancock. My father is unemployed ever since he sold the restaurant. He didn't want to work for people since he was once a boss (a man thing). My relatives are still taking advantages (money, food, etc) from my mother even though they earn more than her. Who said extended family and community are important?? Besides the constantly harassing from my relatives, we are living happily as a family!

## Tat Fu Yuen

My name is Tat Fu Yuen. I am an immigrant from Hong Kong. My migration story started in 1981 when my father received a job offering from the Four Seas restaurant in the Chinatown area of Boston. This was his big chance to bring our family over to the United States and live a better life. So in 1982, he accepted the offer and came to the United States, while the rest of the family waited for him. In addition, there was not enough money for the family and we did not have green cards. My father started working as soon as he arrived to America. Because he did not have enough money to rent a place to live, he asked the manager of Four Seas Restaurant if he could live upstairs of the restaurant. Fortunately, the manager of the restaurant gave him that chance. This was how my father saved this income and brought the entire family to America. Early 1983, my entire family finally came to the United States.

I was two years old when we all arrived to reunite with my father. At the beginning we did not live with my father, instead he arranged for us to stay with a close relative for a short while in Utica, New York. While we waited for him in New York, my father looked for an apartment. After a month, my father found a small apartment in Jamaica Plain and we lived there for twelve long years.

Jamaica Plain was not a bad neighborhood. Our apartment was close to the subway station and the commute to Chinatown was not so bad. We were able to visit Chinatown often. There were also other Chinese people in the neighborhood and I was able to make some friends. But the apartment was very small for the whole family. There was one

big room, a bathroom and a living room that connects to the kitchen. At first, there were five of us, then, in 1983, another baby boy joined the family. Even though my family was getting bigger, we still had to live in the small Jamaica Plain apartment because it was the only affordable place at the time.

When my sister graduated high school, the thought of my sister moving out really forced my parents to think the situation of the family. More importantly, my parents wanted to keep the family together. So in 1995, my parents brought a house in Quincy, MA. This is the home we live in today. It was very hard for my family at the beginning. My parents worked hard to keep up with the mortgage. For example, my mother was both a dim sum lady at Lei Jing restaurant and Imperial Tea House a worker at a Donut company. My mother has been at the factory for four years and, slowly, things are getting better. But she still does not health insurance and I think she is not treated fairly by the donut company.

Now my father has decreased his hours at the restaurant in Chinatown. My sister is working full time and my brother is attending school part time. We are all starting to live a better life. With my little brother and I still in school, we are sure to have a better life and future. Things are seemingly getting better for us as we work harder to attain our goals.

## Truong Tran

My name is Truong Tran. I am from Vietnam and I really like my country. I have two brothers, one sister and my lovely parents. We have been living in the United States for more than ten years. My older brother, Tom Tran, escaped from Can Tho, Vietnam in 1984 on a small boat with 30 other people on it. Can Tho is a place in Vietnam where rivers connect to the ocean. This is where so many Vietnamese boats can escape. Tom said, *“It was a dangerous escape and I will never forget or will ever do any thing like that again.”* Tom graduated from Rider University in New Jersey six years ago. He majored in Marketing. Now he works for a financial company. Another one of my brother, Steven Tran, also escaped from Can Tho. He escaped from Vietnam in 1987 on a small boat with about 45 people aboard. Steven said, *“I think it was a very dangerous escape because the boat was so tiny and there was a very high wave that almost flip the boat over.”* Currently, Steven is a computer technician for a paper company. My sister, Linh Tran came to the United States in 1986. She graduated from Rutgers University in New Jersey in 1994. Right now, she works at a medical research company in New Jersey. Linh said, *“I really like to live here in the United States because I can go to school like everyone else, in Vietnam, I can not go to college because of my parents’ history.”* In Vietnam, the government won’t let the sons or daughters of the South Vietnamese army or officers go to college. They select only from the family or friends they want to attend college. Unfortunately, both of my parents were working for the South Vietnam government before 1975. My father was an officer and my mother was a secretary working with the American General. Therefore, under the

communist system, we couldn't attend college because of my parents' background. My parents paid lots of money for the escaped of my two brothers and sister from Vietnam.

The HO program started in 1989. My parents were happy that they were eligible to go to the United States. In addition, they paid a lot of money for the communist government to handle all the paper work. Finally, my parents were very happy that our family would reunite in the United States some day. After 6 months of paper works and interviewing with the American Embassy, we left our homeland to a new country to reunite with my two brothers and sister. It took us 24 hours to fly to the United States. This was the first time my parents and I were ever on a plane. At first, I liked flying but then, I did not like it anymore. The plane ride made me very sick. All I wanted was to see my two brothers and my sister. I miss them a lot because they were my baby-sitters when they were in Vietnam. In December of 1990, we went to New Jersey and stayed in an apartment where all the refugees and immigrants stayed. We were there for weeks, even months until the immigration officers could find us housing of our own. Fortunately, we were there for two weeks. It was fun to stay with the other refugees and immigrants because of all the exciting stories that were told. The two weeks of our stay was very comfortable, relaxed, and enjoyable. We talked and played soccer. At times, we even played soccer to keep us warm.

After two weeks, we finally were at our own place. It was a huge apartment complex where many of the people were refugees, new immigrants, and low-income families. This is where I saw a lot of people from different countries. When I looked around my neighborhood, I miss all my friends, my entire Vietnamese neighborhood. I did not know any one there, and I felt lonely because I did not speak any English. Speaking

English is important because it was the only way I can make friends in my neighborhood. I thought I needed to speak English well so that I can communicate with different people. More importantly, I can be an interpreter for the Vietnamese community. I think living in the United States challenging. You have to go to school to get education. My goal is to learn as many good things as I can. I would also like to have as many friends as possible and to be a role model for the next generation.

## Zepur Frounjan

October 28, 1983 was the date and year my family and I immigrated to America. I was one year old and I don't remember much. But from what I heard, the life we shared and the hardships we were faced were very difficult.

Our first day in America was a happy day. All the family members reunited at the airport. My aunt, uncle, grandmother and cousins were all waiting to see us. It was the first time in six year since we last saw each other. It was such an emotional day for everyone. We were so happy and we could not stop crying.

They took us into their home. They wanted us to settle down and start new. Soon my parents would look for work. How little we did know that America was in a recession and jobs were extremely scarce. Because of my father's situation, he did not understand English: he had to learn a new way of life, rules, and customs, that it was nearly impossible for him to find a job.

When my father realized the importance of the English language, he decided to go to night school to learn English. This made it difficult for the rest of the family. It was difficult because he did not have a job and he had a family to support. We were all dependent on him for food, clothes and shelter, which he could not provide so instead we looked to my uncle for help.

At first we thought that we would only stay a short while at my relative's house, but a week turned into a year. It was a very difficult year for us. There were so many people in one house. The house became very crowded. There were seven adults and five children all together. There was no such thing as privacy. I had to share a room, sometimes with people I did not



know very well. That year we had to struggle to the new way of life. It made me uneasy about our life here in America.

When I started my first year of school, I was very quiet and kept to myself. I did not interact with the other children in social activities. I did not sing and I did not do anything active. I felt so isolated and felt that I did not fit in with the American crowd. I felt like an outsider because I could not communicate effectively. The other children in class did not make it easier on me. They made fun of the way I spoke and dressed. It was a struggle to wake up each morning and go to school. I hated it.

Then after a year of night school my father became more accustomed with the English language. He was able to find work at a gas station as a mechanic. Even though his English needed improvement, he managed to communicate with others.

My mother also managed to find a job. Even though her English was poor, she was offered a job as a cook at an American restaurant. My parents worked very hard. They worked long hours. Fortunately, their hard work paid off. They managed to save enough money to rent a house three blocks away from my relatives.

A few years later, things started looking much better. We became more familiar with the English language and our English grammar improved. My father got a better job working in a company and from that, a few years later we bought a house.

We began to enjoy our new lives and friends. School for me was going much better. I felt more comfortable in class. I began to understand the materials we were studying. In time, we all began to adapt with our new way of life.

## Jiao Na Zhu

In October of 1995, my two younger sisters and I were on a plane heading to the United States. We were to meet my parents who came before us. The story of our family is very different from other Chinese immigrant story. Our parents arrived in the United States first, then my sisters and me. Three of us had separated from our parents for a few years.

In China we lived in a small village. Village life was very peaceful and we were happy. Although we didn't have a lot of money, we were satisfied with what we had. My parents were farmers. They planted rice twice a year and different kinds of vegetables. We also had many domestic animals. We raised chickens, duck, pig, rabbits, cat and dog. My grandfather who was already in the United States sponsored us. Before he came to Boston, he lived in Columbia, South American. My great-grandfather ran a grocery store there and my grandfather helped his father run the store. It was a family business. After his father died, he sold the store and migrated to Boston. In 1985, my father came to the United States alone. Also at that time my father had already married my mother and had three of us. He came back to visit us in 1987 and 1989. He stayed with us for three months during each visit. We had a great time when we lived together.

In 1992, my mother joined my father. My heart was broken when I heard my mother was going to leave us for the United States. I thought my life would be miserable because I was going to be separated from my mother. I was very close to my mother. But my mother had to leave because she didn't have a choice. I knew she didn't want to by the look of her eyes; she

didn't cry in front of us, but I knew she would cry when she was alone. I understood my parents' difficulty. In this situation, in order to have a better life, they had to get out of China. They did this because they wanted a better life for our family, especially for their children.

Because we were too young to take care of ourselves, we had to live with my grandmother on my mother side and my oldest uncle, an aunt and their three children. We didn't have a "voice" in their house because it was not our house. My grandmother and oldest uncle and his wife took good care of us. They were very nice to us. They never said anything bad to us even though we did something wrong. They always acted as if nothing happened, but this made me feel uncomfortable. I understood that I was an outsider and that I was not a part of this family. My parents sent back a lot of money each year for us. Because we were too young, my grandmother kept money for us. At the same time she also controlled our money. We didn't even have extra money to buy anything we liked. She only gave us the exact amount to buy breakfast during the school days. If we wanted to buy something, we had to ask her for money. She would mark down how much money we spent; she said she would show the evidence to my mom when she came back from U. S. I remembered one time, I asked her for some money to buy new clothes for the New Year. I knew my parents just sent money for the New Year. My parents even mentioned in the letter that she should buy us some new clothes. But my grandmother response was, "Don't waste money, I'm afraid that your parents won't have any money to send back if they lost

their jobs.” I couldn’t say anything at that time. I realized how realistic she was; even though she was my grandmother, people do things when money is involved. If you have no money, then get out of here. “No money no talk.” It seemed very true during that moment. I felt very sad and insecure. I thought if my parent didn’t send any money back, they wouldn’t do that.

Also, after my mother migrated to the United States, my grades dropped immediately. I was a very good student, among the top five. Then once I started seventh grade, I lost interest in school. Trying to deal with everything, with my family being a part, I couldn’t concentrate on my study. It was hard for me to keep my grades up when my parents were not beside me, especially at such a young age. I felt very lost at that time. I felt lonely and unsafe to live in my grandmother’s house. I missed my parents a lot, particularly my mother. I would cry when I miss her. So I wrote a letter to them and told them how much I missed them. I even asked them if they could come back to stay with us. Every time when I write letters, I never have the courage to mail it. I didn’t want my parents to worry about us. I knew that they work very hard in Boston. If I told them some unhappy thing, they would worry too much about us and they, too, would cry for themselves and for us.

In 1993, my uncle came back to China from Australia with his wife. As soon as he saw us, he knew what was the matter. He was the only person who understood, cared, loved and thought about my family and our future. He told my parents that we were unhappy and lonely and how much we missed them and wanted to live with them. He advised my parents how bright our future would be if we could go to the United States. He also said we must go to the United States as soon as possible because it would be more easier for us to learn English at a young age, in order for us to get a higher education

and to in American society. I love my uncle very much. So my parents hurried to hire a good lawyer in New York City to do some kind of paper work and to let the United States government know we were the children my parents. My parents decided to become citizens so that we could come here earlier. I was not happy living at my grandmother's house. There were a lot of problems during these three years. There were money problems, the silent treatment between my cousins and us, and the worst thing was being separated from my parents. I pretended to be happy in front of my relatives because I was the one who talked the most. My two younger sisters were quite. I am the oldest one and I didn't want them see me unhappy. But I would cry with my sisters when were left alone. In fact, I was the unhappiest one; my condition was very difficult because I am the oldest. I had to respect and thank my grandmother, my oldest uncle and his wife for taking care of us and I appreciated the work that they have done for my parents and for us.

In the United States now, my family is together. I am happy and feel happy. I am satisfied with the life here. I attend University of Massachusetts in Boston with my sister. The youngest sister is a senior at Quincy High School. My parents have jobs. We have our house, car, computer and other electric equipments. My sisters and I have our own bedrooms; we have our privacy and enjoy our own little "world". I treasure the times when our family is together. I do my best on everything to make my parents happy, especially in education. My father always tells and reminds us, "Study hard, educate yourself, have better life in the future, you wouldn't have to work like a "Cow" as your parents do." I always keep my father's gold sentence in my mind. Having an education is the only way to become intelligent, successful and fit into the American society.



*Part Two:*  
*Reconstructing Families*





## Vanessa Chan

When I was young, I resented my paternal grandfather. And even today I still hold a grudge. I never knew him personally. He was just some man who existed some where in old black and white photos with a bunch of other people I don't ever recognized.

When I lived in Indiana, my paternal grandmother lived with us, my family. She would take care of us while my parents worked. I remember at times when she was sad and wanted only to be left alone. I tried to talk and listen, but what did I know. I was only a little kid. Later I learned that she was sad because of my grandfather. He was a bad person. Curious, I then asked my father why the sadness and hatred. Again I was ignored because I was a little kid.

When I was in the first grade, a strange event occurred. We were all going to visit my grandfather in Hong Kong. He was very sick and it was fatal. Suddenly, this man had become more real to me. When we arrived in Hong Kong, a peculiar older woman greeted us and I was told to address her as "*por-por*." "*Por-por*," is a term to address your maternal grandmother. I was shocked my parents response. "I already have a "*por-por*," I replied. Horrified at my answer, my parents finally explained that "*por-por*" is also a polite and formal term to address an elderly woman. This is something new that I learned on my Hong Kong trip. I was even told to address my elders, as auntie and uncles, without knowing if they were my relatives or not.

Unfortunately, my grandfather died. I was never allowed to see him. The only contact with him was through crying and sadness of the adults. It wasn't until the funeral that I

got to see what he looked like. At the funeral we had to wear traditional mourning clothes. I thought they were completely uncomfortable. Then suddenly, I realized something odd and different. I noticed that grandma has only three children while my father's father has seven children.

This bizarre twist turned some more. The fact is my grandfather married more than once. This means that my father has more than one family. I also learned that my grandfather had abandoned him and his family in China and started a new life in Hong Kong. And this is how the resentment began. But the real story is yet to come.

According to my grandmother, grandfather had relocated the entire family to Hong Kong because of communism. This switch was not easy. Not for my grandmother, she never adjusted to life in Hong Kong and became very unhappy. My grandfather was ill at the time and could not work and the financial woes increased. My grandmother was so accustomed to the better lifestyle that she could not stand it anymore. Her patience was running out. Very determine, my pregnant grandmother packed all her belongings, fetched my father, his sister, returned to her home in China.

Once she returned to China, it was too late to go back. Her irrational decision had torn the family completely and her children lived a very different lifestyle in China. On the other hand, my grandfather became a very successful businessman and went on with his life. The separation was never repaired because my grandmother still blames him, and also because my grandfather was never a part of my father's life. Yet my father never resented him.

Lastly, this story has made me realized that one person's actions can affect the lives of so many people. By moving back

to China, my grandma changed the course of life for everyone. For example, my father would have had more choices in Hong Kong. Thus my grandfather would have never remarried. But who knows, if that one decision was never made, I may not be where I am either. I could be living in Hong Kong. This story is also about family and the issues we face together.

## Duc Nguyen

I was born in Vietnam. I grew up there also. Vietnam, a small and weak country, suffered civil war for more than during thirty years. It was the north verses the south. This is the same people with the same culture and the same language fighting each other. To some it was communism verses capitalism. All my life, I lived along the border. I always thought that there was no chance of crossing it. Suddenly, an event occurred, the Communists occupied the South Vietnam territory. They forced all officials and officers of the former regime into prison. I was among those officials and officers. I was sent to prison. I spent six years in prison and because of this, I was able to enter the United States as a refugee status under a program called “humanitarian operation.”

I came to the United States 1993. Luckily, I was sponsored by a reverend. My final destination was Chicago. First I will talk about my experience about learning another culture. It was at the airport. First, we landed at the Los Angeles airport. We only had 15 minutes to gather our luggage and board another plane. I wanted my son, who was nine years old son to remain seated so that I can take care of the paper work. He did not stay seated. Everything was so new to him and he wanted to see everything. Instead he ran up and down the aisle. Because I was so afraid of losing him and I needed to fill out the papers for us, that, I threatened to slap him. All of a sudden, a policeman came over, pulled out the handcuffs and was going to arrest me. I was very surprised. Later, a Vietnamese social worker explained to me that in the United States, parents are not suppose to beat their children. This is called child abuse. Of course, I never thought

that my act was abusive. How could I abuse my son? I have only one son and he is my life. I was very hurt in hearing that I would be arrested for child abuse. I was angry with the policeman. How could he equate a slap (an act that had not been done yet) as an abuse? His reaction gave me a bad impression of America. I really crossed to an entirely different culture.

In Vietnam, the father has full power over the children. He can educate the children and he can even sometimes beat them as a form of discipline. I think this is not abuse. Only the wicked men or those who lost all humanity can abuse their children. The law defines child abuse as “intentional use of physical force or intentional omission of care by a parent or care taker that cause a child to be hurt, maimed, or killed.” My case does not match the definition. Why did the policeman have the intention to arrest me, a new comer, without an explanation? From day to day, living in the American society, I think that some laws were applied wrongfully in many cases, particularly in the minority communities. I still remember a quote in the newspaper from a Mexican mother who was arrested for child abuse. She said, “*Whether, I beat him now or you will shoot him on the street.*” This implies that, if she is not allowed to discipline her son now, he would become a bad man and the police would shoot him as a criminal on the street. Child abuse is a big social problem in the United States. Although I still disagree with what the Americans consider to be child abuse, I try to adapt to the new culture in the new country that I chose to live my life. But, I also want to discipline my son according to a culture where children respect and obey their parents.

## Hsiao Pan

The person that I interviewed is from Vietnam. He came to United States in 1995 with his whole family - parents, a younger sister by plane. They came here legally by submitting documents to the American government. He told me that according to the law, those who spend more than three years in jail due to communist's persecution could legally apply for entrance to United States. So they all came here legally and no one sponsored his family. Fortunately, one of his father's friends who lived in Boston already found an apartment for them before they arrived in Boston. His father used to be a soldier in Vietnam.

Before 1975, everything was quite good for his family. They had two houses in Saigon and lived well there. After 1975, the communist took over and jailed his father for three years. He told me that some people were in prison for more than ten years. His father was the lucky one who only spent three years in jail. Before they came to America, they sold one of their houses in Saigon and in order to have some money in the United States.

Comparing to other Vietnamese people, his life is much smoother here. He was enrolled in the 11th grade at Roxbury high school. Before he came to U.S., he studied English very hard. He even read English books while studying in Vietnam. He only spent a couple of months to get used to the American accent and he didn't have a big problem when communicating with people. The only problem for him now is that his reading speed is very slow compared to the other American students. All in all, his family is doing well. They have three new cars and

a paid-off house in Dorchester now. He does not need to work while studying at University of Massachusetts in Boston while many of his Vietnamese peers have to work part-time while going to school. His father can speak English, and his mother speaks French fluently. Basically, he likes America a lot but dislikes the food in the school cafeteria. The hamburgers taste differently than the ones he used to have in Vietnam. They have different kind of recipes in Vietnam. For example: there's no pickle in the hamburgers prepared in Vietnam.

His friends are all Asian. His parents want him to marry an Asian girl. He used to have several girlfriends from different Asian countries, some were American born Korean, and some were immigrants from China or refugees from Vietnam. There is almost no chance for him to marry a girl beside an Asian girl. He and his family think this is very important to marry among their own group or at least among Asian group. He thinks that American born Vietnamese people have the Vietnamese looking faces, but they are just like Americans on the inside. These people are very open which is very different than those Vietnamese born in Vietnam. There is definitely a difference in culture and way of life.

The one thing that shocked him of the American culture happened about 5 years ago. One day he was talking to his younger sister and his sister talked back to him. He felt that his sister disrespected him, and in a rage, he slapped her across the face. The next day, his sister's teacher noticed a red mark on her face and asked her about it. His sister did not think about it twice and told the truth. Then two social workers came to their

house and tried to find out what was going on. His mother told them that there's nothing serious happening and that they were just playing and an accident happened. The social worker warned him and told him that if this kind of situation happens again, they'll have to do something about it next time. He was shocked to learn this and did not understand why they bother to intervene in the family's matter. In a Vietnamese family, men are the person in charge of the house. They have power over the family's affair. The young ones have to respect the older. But here in the United States, it's a totally different story. Everyone has an equal right to live, no matter who you are.

The interviewee said that most women from Vietnam do not know how to drive. Some Vietnamese people are jealous of his mother because she knows how to drive and has a new car. One day his mother drove her new car to her ESL class. As soon as class was dismissed, she discovered that the exterior of her car was completely scratched on both sides. No one knew who did it, but they thought probably one of the ESL students did it. There are some outsiders who are jealous about his family have now and there are some Vietnamese who are jealous within their own group. He also mentioned that some Vietnamese classmates are jealous of those Vietnamese students whose Grade Point Average is high or of people who has better-paying job after graduating from college.

This is a different perspective of Vietnamese community then the video shown in our class. The video was about Vietnamese people who are willing to help each other when they are in difficult situation. They live, share what they have and entertainment together when they have nothing. But they are jealous of people who are one of them. They get jealous when other people are doing better than themselves. I think Vietnamese and Chinese people have similar cultures. We are



supposed to be proud of them, but instead they are jealous of people who are doing better than us. But this is difficult for some people, some may work harder than you, but the outcome may not be the same.

I think that I know and understand Vietnamese people by talking to them more. This closer connection with the Vietnamese students really helps me to understand them better. I used to stereotype Vietnamese people. I thought they were nothing else but gangster. Look at these Vietnamese people in school, they are getting higher education and giving to their community and they value their community. This is good of them! I respect them and I would like to get to know them. It is good to know that another culture is similar to the Chinese culture in a way. Actually, I feel like I am starting to like these friendly people already. Do not make any opinions or stereotypes about any culture until you know them better. This is a very important point that I am more aware of as I am just getting to know the Vietnamese students here.



# Thao Huynh









KY - NIỆM

Gọi hình con đến anh đi nhỏ  
 lại những ngày ta qua với  
 bạn ở những địa con đang  
 khi con ở lại với mẹ  
 nó!

Nữ Hải Quân

người vô danh khi









*Part Three:*  
*Reconstructing Identities*



## Quang Nguyen

I was four years old when my family came to the United States. Our long trek from Laos to Vietnam and Cambodia eventually ended in the United States. My parents' goals were to escape from the devastating effects of the Vietnam War and to settle in a place where there would be ample opportunities and where we would live our lives in a place where we can live freely and safely. The fact that we already had family in the United States made the move easier.

Our cousins suggested that we should start a new life in America. The idea of raising their children in a place where they can get an education and live freely also determined their decision to flee. With the ruins from the war and the uncertainty of the future, my parents made their decision.

To make the journey less stressful, my family separated and agreed to meet up again at the refugee camps. My mother took my older brother while the rest of us stayed together. When we finally met, it was torture. We were questioned by the authorities and were put in prison camps. Luckily a family friend helped rescue us. We had documents from our cousin and finally reached a United States army base site. There we were allowed to board the airplane and headed for the United States.

We landed in Boston, and settled in Andover, Massachusetts, where we started our new lives. From the generosity of our cousins and family sponsor, my parents were able to find employment and educational placements for us. After a few years, my family had adapted well to the new surroundings. We even had a new car to prove this.

Then all of a sudden, my whole world collapsed. When I was in the first grade, my father suffered a severe stroke that paralyzed the left side of his body. During his hospital stay, he received extensive treatment and rehab. My father's inability to use his body put a tremendous strain on my family. My mother became the sole provider for the family. She struggled with family while working two jobs. Our duties were to take care of ourselves while in school and care for my bedridden father. We were often in low spirits.

The closeness and support from each other was nonexistent. We did not have a father figure to look to for guidance and moral support. We dreamed for a leader to carry us together and make us whole again. It was like everyone in the family went on their own ways for survival. A really sad time was when we didn't care about Christmas. We didn't have a tree nor cared for presents. My family didn't care anymore. Nothing seemed important except to survive for the next day. We didn't communicate. We didn't talk about daily issues. We were a silent family hurting inside feeling empty and lonely. My mother was struggling to pay the bills. My uncle and aunt even had to sacrifice their young lives to work and help support the family. My siblings and I eventually became independent and did things, made decisions on our own. For example, my older brother worked and paid for his own education, during his four years of college.

Growing up, I often struggled with the notion of knowing who I really was. All throughout my life, I interacted with only white people. Everything I did. All my friends were white so I mainly grew up thinking that I was one of them. I so much wanted to look and act like my friends. I didn't have much contact with my family so I didn't speak Vietnamese at all. In a sense I refused to because I wanted to believe that I was an

American just like my friends. Even my white friends regarded me as white and not Asian. This was a cruel moment in my life because I actually thought that I was one of them. My identity crisis came to a crossroad when I finally realized that I was not being true to my family and myself. I started to question who am I. I was not proud of myself so I didn't treat my family with respect. I knew that I was different and kept this feeling locked deep inside me. I came to a realization that I needed to reassess myself as a person and to find happiness within me. I needed to be proud of who I am and what I stand for.

Sooner than later, I became curious to know about my Vietnamese culture. It was important for me to understand my culture and to appreciate where my parents are from. Suddenly, one day I wanted to change my perspective in life, learn about my heritage, and value it. I wanted to experience new relationships with other Vietnamese people and to learn from them. With this in mind, I decided to transfer to the University of Massachusetts in Boston, where there's a large Vietnamese population.

After taking the *Southeast Asians in the United States* course, I learned the importance of having social interaction with other Vietnamese students. The particular experience paved the way to understanding my culture better and experiencing what it means to be a refugee and immigrant. Hearing similar migration stories and the issue of assimilation from other students provided me with a sense of unity in the classroom. I felt so supportive and comfortable. I easily shared my thoughts and comments with the entire class. Honestly, I can say that I am very appreciative and lucky to have experienced a class of this nature. It was riveting and fulfilling to have been in a class that had so much impact on me. Furthermore, it helped me acknowledge other cultures too.

## Toan Bui

Living in America is a dream for so many people. Many consider it heaven on earth. For some, America is a place where their dreams are shattered. On the other hand, America can be a mosaic of dreams and realities; happiness and disappointment; successes and struggles; love and hatred; and acceptance and prejudice. Each person sees the mosaic in a different light. Some may see the whole assortment while others only see an image. To me, America is a long and continuous journey.

I came to the United States in April of 1999 from Saigon. After flying for twenty-eight hours, the plane finally landed at the Los Angeles International Airport. I was very exhausted but happy and excited all at the same time. Going through the customs check out, there was a photo of President Clinton and the words, “*Welcome to America.*” I told myself, “*It is real. I am here, in America.*” I took a moment to have a good look at everything and tried to capture it all. Finally I thought I was about to see for myself the America that I have heard so much about.

During the first week in America, I learned about everything and everyone by watching television. I was overwhelmed. There was too much news, all the scandals, and advertisements on television everyday. Sometimes, it was too much. For example, I was terrified when I heard about the Columbine shooting. And this happened the day I arrived in America. This made me very sad and insecure. Why did such a terrible thing happen with no reason at all?

So, to me American television has been a real phenomenon. For twenty-four hours a day, I can watch live



news reports and sensational stories. Of course, sometimes it's too much for me to observe and digest. Anything can turn into news. But on the other hand, I like the fact that it is a source of information.

People say that seeing is believing. I always thought that America was the greatest place in the whole world, where every person can have a happy life of wealth and prosperity. And then there is also crime and violence. I soon discovered the many faces of American society. There are rich people and there are poor people. There is love and caring, but also hatred and prejudice.

I have also observed the fast paced lifestyle. People are always rushing, busy doing many things. They rarely have time to look back, to reflect, or to miss. Yesterday's news quickly becomes the past. The fast pace lifestyle has had a tremendous effect on me. I had to try very hard to keep up with everything and everyone. All of a sudden, I felt as if I had to change even though I have been in America for only a short while.

Life is definitely more demanding here. The fact is people have the right to live the way they want. But people also have to be responsible for their own lives, too. Society expects everyone to have their own opinion and to make a stand on what they believe. This, I think is great. However, it can be very competitive and aggressive. *Everything must be the best, number one, and super.* People seem to be under a great deal of stress all the time.

Before, I used to think that I was a young person with a long life ahead of me, but now I feel as though I don't have

enough time to do everything that I want. There are so many choices and opportunities. And then again, I sometimes think it's too much and lose my sense of peace. I am always chasing after some goal but sometimes I don't even know what it is. Before, I always wanted to embrace the American culture and was eager to learn, but now I feel anxious and unsatisfied. I have never experienced these feelings before.

Should I adopt the new culture in order to keep up or should I retreat to my own culture and preserve the values that I am about to abandon? I face this dilemma everyday. I am torn between the two cultures, and with the life I had before and the one that I am building. At thirty, I am not too old to embrace these changes, but I feel that my experiences of the Vietnamese culture can't be erased. This is not an easy dilemma.

Despite all these issues, America can offer me many opportunities. Here, I have a chance to obtain better education, live in a challenging society, and meet people from diverse backgrounds. I have a chance to also learn about many different ideas and to dream about doing things that I have never done before. If I can balance my Vietnamese culture with my new one in America, I will be happier. My journey has only just begun. Everyday, I feel more certain about my future and more at home here in America.

## Vineeta Samlal

Migrating to America was not an easy journey. I am from Trinidad. My family migrated to America in October of 1995. One significant reason for this migration was to seek better educational opportunities. Initially the idea of coming to America was never thought of. My parents had decent jobs and my siblings were in good schools. This idea came about when a Hindi organization, *Saraswati Mandiram*, sponsored and supported my family to the United States. It's an institute that offers information on holistic health, yoga, meditation, music, philosophy and science. In Trinidad, my father was a cultural officer. And because of his occupation, my family had a chance to live in America.

When I arrived in America, all my expectations and imaginations of America vanished completely. This I want to explain. First in Trinidad, I was a member of the majority race. The population of Trinidad consists of 50% Indians, 45% blacks with very little Chinese, French, white and Spanish. Here in America, I am one of the minority groups. Because of this, I immediately felt alienated and foreign. My family experienced a heavy blow of culture shock and I went into a state of depression. I was aware that I was different, very different and to the point that I didn't know how to communicate and interact with people of different race. I felt as if I spoke with an accent and that people would not understand me. For the first time, I realize how it was to feel like a foreigner in an unknown land.

While in Trinidad, America looked so glamorous and wealthy. I used to think those who lived there were surely the luckiest people in the world. Upon my arrival here, I was

slapped in the face with the harsh realities of America. I faced discrimination and had to work very hard to put a roof over my head. *America became a place where you just paid bills, worked and slept.* I was very ignorant about the kinds of people that were living here. I only thought that I would have interaction with the whites. Much to my surprise, there were blacks, Hispanics, other Asians, and Native Americans. I immediately felt invisible because there weren't any familiar faces like me.

In addition, my family and I experienced 'cultural deprivation.' Unfortunately for my family the Hindu organization relocated to New Hampshire. So that cultural feeling of home was gone. And besides my family couldn't just move to New Hampshire, my parents had already established employment in Boston, I was already accepted to the University of Massachusetts, and my brother received a full scholarship to an all boys private school. Based on all these choices, my father decided it was best to remain in Boston. After a while, our visits to the Hindu organization became less frequent. In Trinidad, we were very involved in the cultural traditions. We celebrated Hindu festivals, attended the Hindu temples regularly, and affiliated with various Hindu organizations. The unique thing about living in Trinidad was that my father taught Hindi, an Indian language, Indian classical music and philosophy. Because there aren't any Hindu organizations here, we were culture deprived. We felt uncomfortable expressing ourselves here. As a result, my family became closer and very supportive. We practiced our culture in our own little way within our family circle. It is very easy to be influenced by the American culture and that is why my family strives to preserve and value our culture.

Even though we were aware of the negative aspects of America, we still decided to migrate. After all, America

was a land of unlimited opportunities. This is sole reason why my parents decided to move to America. Education is very important to my family. My parents can't stress enough how important education is. On the other hand, in Trinidad you need a good deal of money to attend a university. Since there was only one university in Trinidad, the chances of getting accepted were pretty slim. It would have been impossible for my father to send all his children to a university. So, therefore, we knew that America would provide us the opportunity to pursue an excellent education.

Our lives in America are very different than in Trinidad. Here, at first, my family struggled and is still struggling to make it. For example, my mother's day starts at four o'clock in the morning and her day ends usually at midnight. My mother works very hard, for herself and for her family. She has a twenty-four hour job. She is a mother, wife and friend. My parents had to work ten times harder in America. They work day and night just to survive. While in Trinidad, we owned our own home. It was very relaxing and the days were peaceful. Because life is so stressful in America, my siblings and I contribute as much as we can financially so that we can ease the financial burden of my parents.

Ultimately, in America, I couldn't escape discrimination. There were many occasions when I was discriminated against because of my race and gender. I felt so inferior and voiceless. For example, five years ago I would have never considered raising my hand in class. I was very afraid of talking in class and, thought that whatever I had to say was unimportant. There were many cold, cruel faces that surrounded me. Finally, I had enough courage to speak up. I did this because I believe in equality. Because of what I experienced, I felt very angry. I began to realize all the societal inequalities manifesting right

before me. Even worse was the fact that I couldn't do anything about it. I was different. I am a minority. I am not white, therefore, I didn't consider myself privileged. So after a while, I became very opinionated. I started to speak up to make my voice be heard. I am now a changed person. I am stronger and I remain true to my conviction. I have become braver and bold. Having a voice is what made me stronger. I stand up for my rights. After all, America is supposed to be the land of equality.

There are many struggles, difficulties, and hardships living in America. It is especially true for minorities and newer immigrants. Our society breeds hostility, discrimination, injustice, inequality, and racism. Living in America has made me stronger person. It has made my family stronger. Family is important and we value our culture.

Although I miss my homeland very much, I have learned to live in America. I have adapted to the American culture and I can communicate effectively with other cultures. I have also learned how to make important connections with other Asian culture. I now realize that I am not alone. Other people encounter very similar situations. Given this, I am more conscious and aware of other people's cultures, particular when I meet an Asian person. I have a greater knowledge of their history and culture. Lastly, I am very grateful to have the opportunity to listen to other migration stories, specifically those who were affected by the Vietnam War.

## Samir Verma

I am a child of Asian parents. I was born in Quincy, Mass. My parents came to this country for a better education and in search of a better life. Being born in America, I find myself caught between two cultures, which I find difficult to comprehend. I struggle with the two cultures. I have always lived a schizophrenic existence. My family life is full of warmth, closeness, and support while another life outside school where I have my friends, television and the feeling that you are on your own.

Sometimes, I feel like I struggle with my identity. On one hand I am fascinated by my parents' culture, while, on the other hand I am hooked on to the American way of life. Sometimes, someday I would have to reconcile myself to try to figure out which culture I belong to. This is difficult to deal with.

Even though I was born here in the United States, I feel that I am different. I feel that I don't belong here. I start to realize that because I am different, I think that different often means negativity. But whenever I visit India, I always feel whole. Being in India gives me a sense of freedom, which I don't feel living in America. When I visit India, there is a sense of comfort and that I belong. Perhaps, the physical layout has something to do with it. I don't have to worry. I don't have to always look over my shoulder, wondering, if someone was out to get me for being different.

Being culturally mixed can be heart wrenching at times. Many times I have heated disagreements with my parents because they think I am not Indian enough while I think, they

are too traditional. But straddling the fence does have its advantages, one of which is allowing me to see both sides. I feel good working in a racially diverse group. Having grown up with white people, I feel that I understand the white culture pretty well. I am more aware of international affairs because at school I get along well with different ethnic background students. Many social problems deal with class and race. In addition, I can see myself siding with certain important issues that affect the progress of this country and of human kind.

I feel that being brought up in this country by Indian parents, I have come to embrace a heterogeneous cultural identity. This hybridization has distanced me from the strict polarities of “Indian” and “American” culture. This unique position has allowed me throughout the years of growing up in this country to be more aware of the Indian American experiences and to value those experiences. Through cross culture perspectives, I have always found strength and comfort in my ability to collect memorable observations and to laugh from them. I feel that the main aim of any society, to have a working society, people must work together. It is important for people to give their own perspective and do their part to build a better world where every one can live peacefully. Hopefully then, people can pursue dreams without worry.







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Edited by Saurikhane Konekeo, Woongsoon Lee, Outtara Ly,  
Miao Zhu, Giau Tran, and Frances K. Chow

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generations of Our Time contributors.

For ordering and other information, contact the Asian American  
Studies Program at UMass Boston at 617-287-5658 or  
Peter.Kiang@umb.edu, or visit [www.asamst.umb.edu](http://www.asamst.umb.edu).

