

Student Handout
Oakland Museum of California
What's Going On? California and the Vietnam Era
Lesson Plan #3
Coming to Terms: Stories of Southeast Asian Political Refugees

Oral History

Ham Tran

Filmmaker Ham Tran is a second-generation Vietnamese American.

Well, I think the ... my ... my reactions to the American films about the Vietnam War, I mean, I was watching those films, I mean, the ... the big films, such as *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*. I think that ... I guess a good analogy would be I was a child watching these films and before I learned how to speak I watched it and I did not have the kind of ... any kind of reaction to it. I took it for what it was. You know? Um, it ... it's the language of cinema. It's being able to tell my own story. And now that I'm a film-maker, that was my first word. This film is kind of like my first word and saying "Wait a minute, let me tell my part of the history."

Um, and I think that ... I don't know, you know, how the rest of the Vietnamese community feel but I ... in ... in my point of view, um, now sitting here and if ... if another movie came out and talked about the Vietnam War, I would be able to look at that through a different kind of lens and it will be "Wait a minute, which side of the story are you trying to tell?" I mean, is this the same rehash of ... of the American conqueror or ... or you know, the Americans going back there and instill this great sense of pride and the Vietnamese are still VCs and Charlies, you know?

Um, it's about representation. I think that in those films now going back and watching them, it's like every Vietnamese face or sort of background, they're like blades of grass in that green field that stands behind the American soldiers. You know?

And I think that for most Vietnamese people, that's how we've had to watch those films: in silence, um, not really having our stories told. And I think that now this generation, um, we're getting older and we're getting into, you know, art, photography, you know, film-making, stage performance theatre, we're able to tell that part of our story now. You know? We're ... we're saying our first word, um, and really trying to ... trying to tell a story with that. So.

(OFF-MIC)

Interviewer: You touch upon this but I'm just curious ... you came here in the sixth grade, right? Sixth?

Third.

Interviewer: Third grade.



I guess I fell a little behind. I was eight years old but I came in and I started in the third grade.

Interviewer: Eighth grade ... I mean, eight years old. You're eight years old and you came here. And so just a ... when you grow up ... growing up in California then, did you feel ... what ... did you always feel somewhere in-between, being a Vietnamese and an American? Or you were a Vietnamese American or you were in this community or what was that like?

Well, my story growing up in America is ... is actually, um, a little different because my family is ethnic Chinese Vietnamese. So you know, we grew up in Jalong [?], which is the Chinatown of ... of Saigon. And um, when I was there at home, I would speak Chinese, uh, Chutal [?], with my ... it's a southern Canton dialect. So I would speak that with my parents but with my grandmother, she was Vietnamese, so I spoke Vietnamese to her. My grandfather remarried. So ... so I would speak Vietnamese to her. So I had this kind of bicultural thing happening.

Um, but I think that the culture really came from the language because I was only Chinese by language, not really culture. Um, of course this took many years to ... to realize this. But um, so we were Buddhists, we were in Vietnam. And uh, growing up, having Vietnamese friends and everything. Now, we left Vietnam, we went to Thailand and um, for a refugee camp, and then we came over to America. All of a sudden, this is like a whole new world. My family, we were sponsored through the Christian coalition by my aunt.

And ... and we came over here and my dad said "Okay, now you are no longer Buddhist, you are a Christian because God brought you here to America and God wanted you to have a ... a second chance." So okay, so religion out the door.

Then we were at home when I was growing up and I was, you know, you're no longer Vietnamese, you are Chinese. Okay, that's out the door. Um, and so basically I had Chinese ... I spoke Chinese at home. When I went ... went to school, um, I spoke English. So growing up in America, I grew up, you know, Chinese American up to a certain point. When I got into, I guess, junior high school, I had a lot of Vietnamese friends. But I was still not really, um, I grew up learning to assimilate, basically. And ... and in school I think that all of, um, all of my ... my education, intermediate education, all the way up through college was sort of like in ... like an institutionalized amnesia where you forget your culture, you ... you know, okay, in order to be an American, you have to not be Vietnamese. In order to be an American, you have to not be Chinese. So unlike Lum, the language just fell ... fell away. And so, my Vietnamese was horrible. Horrible. And it wasn't until, um, after college that I joined a Vietnamese American acting group. It was called Club O' Noodles. My girlfriend and I at the time, uh, we went to see their ... their performance. And the show was called "Laughter from the Children of War." And it was people my age doing performance about their experience coming over to America, being boat people, being Vietnamese immigrants, refugees and having to get food stamps, you know? Going to McDonald's and not knowing how to order.



And so it was like “French fry? What is French fry? We want potato. We don’t want French fry, we want potato.” You know? And so those things, all those things, like when we ... hey, that’s ... that was me. Hey, wait a minute, this is my culture. So it’s ... it’s really not until at the end of my college years that I really discovered my Vietnamese roots. And getting into film school was, you know, sort of seeing the films that I’ve done through film school, the traces of my path of going back to my Vietnamese roots. My first film was in Cantonese. It was really about a ... a little kid. Um, his father sends him away to get herbal medicine and he gets into trouble.

My second film was called *Pomegranate* and that was about watering pomegranate trees with my grandfather who had died of cancer. And the connection is pomegranate in Chinese means “cancerous stones.” And so, um, but the Vietnamese sort of slowly ebbed its way in and the tides got a little higher. You know? [*Inaudible*] there was a lot of Vietnamese music in the background. The sets looked Vietnamese. I had to build the set and um, my memories came back of ... of going to uh, the cemetery every year for memorials. Uh, and seeing these uh, shy plants. I guess in America they’re called sensitive plants. Where you touch them and the leaves just kind of fold and they droop. And so, you know, a lot of Vietnamese memories and all this stuff started coming back to me. And that led to ... to you know, *Far and Awake* and writing *The Anniversary*.

So I guess uh, get— ... getting back to ... to the question of culture: how did I grow up in America? I ... I grew up American. But it’s ... it’s sort of art and film-making has ... has been my way of ... of retracing my steps. Um, and I think that for now, I ... you know, you talk about languages and um, I think there was a quote by August Wilson who said that “If you lose ... anyone who loses their connection to their grandparents ...” I’m actually bastardizing this, what he said. But um, killing it. But August Wilson said something to the effect that you know, your connection to your roots are your grandparents. And if you lose their language, you will forget who you are. If you lose their culture, you will forget who you are. So know your grandparents’ history because that’s where you come from.

