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VIET 220
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Final Project: What's in a Name

Introduction

I began this project as a way to collect the experiences, both my own and of others, that have shaped my own understanding of my Vietnamese American heritage. From reeducation to refugees, I'd grown up listening to these stories that intrigued me about a country I had never seen. When I had the chance to visit Vietnam as a child and later an adult, I found myself only more fascinated, yet in a different manner. What truly struck me from these visits were the differences, whether in generation or country of current residence, between us that shared in this one culture. Whether it was my parents who were born in Vietnam and left as adults, or my siblings who had left as children, or our family that remained, to me who had never known Vietnam but in stories, we were Vietnamese, and yet we were all Vietnamese in very different ways.

For this project specifically, I wanted to grapple with Vietnamese language and culture through several different lenses, and for that, I decided to look through the perspective of several different characters. Each story centers on a main character and his/her name and through the course of events, allows the reader to meditate on its meaning and value. I have included only two in this final draft but hope one day to expand this into far more. Finally, I want to thank you Thay Quang for allowing me, and our class, the freedom to explore these themes we have developed throughout the semester in a myriad of ways. I can only hope mine will add something to the many voices that have come before me.

Hùng: Bravery

Không có gì quý hơn độc lập, tự do. Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom.

The banner bearing this motto was far more prominent than the sign bearing its name at the doors of the Cà_Mau reeducation camp. As the truck carried the men to their new quarters, Hùng laughed quietly to himself, thinking that he'd never felt less independent or less free than he did at that moment. The year was 1979, Year of the Sheep, if the Tết decorations he'd seen in passing were correct. Had it really been four years since his arrest? It hardly seemed possible.

Perhaps the most painful part of his imprisonment came last month when Hùng met his daughter, now nearing four years old, for the first time since she was born. He had not allowed his wife Mai to bring her to the previous camps he'd been imprisoned in, ashamed that a child should have to see her father in such a state. Yet when the guards informed Hùng that he would soon be transferred to the far southern province of Cà_Mau he relented, unsure of when he would be able to see them again.

For days before their arrival, Hùng worried. He couldn't sleep. He almost wrote Mai to say that he had changed his mind. But these fears melted when he first saw her, when she first called him *Ba*, father. For a child of four, Tú had an incredibly bright face, and though she had not seen him since infancy, she embraced him with all the love of a daughter. As he held her in his arms, Hùng made a pledge to himself to escape Vietnam. He had toyed with the thought for many months now, yet he still hesitated, remembering the cause for which he had sacrificed over ten years of his life. He had fought so desperately to defend his beliefs, his country, and now who was he to desert it? But these fears could hold no light to that first embrace, and Hùng knew that Vietnam held no future for his family.

He stepped down from the caravan and prepared to head for the sleeping barracks but was redirected towards an open field. The barracks were overcrowded they were told, and tonight the men were to sleep under open air until others left for another camp in the morning. Many of the men grumbled, saying how the mosquitoes and bugs would eat them alive, but Hùng mused that the flimsy nets they were given were hardly better. As he closed his eyes, he still clung to the memory of his wife and daughter in that brief moment and prayed for sleep to come soon so that they might be reunited in his dreams.

But sleep would have to wait.

“They think they can treat us like cattle, sending us out to sleep in the fields. Actually we’re worse than cows, even they get a roof,” the man on his right spat, “So what are you in here for?”

Hùng opened his eyes to see a man chewing on betel leaves and throwing rocks at no one. He was thin, as they all were, but taller than most and had traces of a strong build. His face was round, younger than he appeared at first glance, but hardened. Hùng rarely talked to the other men in these camps, seeing it useless to make friends when they were moved around so often, but he liked something about this man, something he couldn’t quite place.

“I’m Hùng,” he offered, “I was an officer in Tiền Giang Province. I tried to escape with my family to Cambodia after The Fall, but a band of soldiers caught us on the road... and who are you?”

“Thiên Bảo,” he stuck a hand towards Hùng. “I was a journalist with too many opinions and too little sense.”

“I see,” after a pause, “You have an... interesting name. How did you get it?”

“Ah, my folks converted to Catholicism right before I was born. Heavenly protection!” he said with a swing of his arms, “Nice intentions, but not a lot of good that did me. Hùng you said? Fitting name for a soldier.”

“Yes, I didn’t plan on being a soldier though. I was studying to become a pilot before I enlisted. I figured the army could expedite the process until I found out I was colorblind. No one’s going to give a plane to a man who can’t tell sky from sea. But I decided to stay, I worked hard, and they promoted me to officer.”

“So were you just caught up or did you actually believe all that capitalist bullshit the Americans fed you?”

Hùng made a face at the blunt comment. He had believed in the cause. He had believed in democracy.

“I thought you were arrested for being on the Republic’s side? What kind of beliefs are those?”

“I’m on nobody’s side,” he turned to look at Hùng, “This whole war was just a game that these other countries used our men to play with. North versus South. Communism versus Capitalism. It’s all a sham. Neither side was going to liberate Vietnam, so it doesn’t matter who won. We all lost. That’s what I believe.”

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The next morning, the two made their way out to the river, joining another group of men on their assignment to build a dam. As they made the journey, Thiên Bảo decided to lighten the mood with a joke.

“A farmer in a cart comes across a stubborn cow on the road,” he began, “The cow won’t budge, so the farmer tries to lure it away with food. He tries to push it. He tries

whipping the animal, but as hard as he tries, the cow merely stands put. Suddenly, another man who was watching them comes up and whispers into the cow's ear. Suddenly it darts off as fast as it can."

"What did the stranger say?"

"He said, 'Now Cow, if you don't move, this farmer here is actually a Viet Cong official who will take you to the New Economic Zone.'" The men broke out in roaring laughter.

Their guard took notice of the rowdy prisoners, and when questioned, a man merely repeated the joke to a quieter round of snickers.

"Which of you said this?" the guard screamed at the men, who silently stared at their feet. "What, the funny man is too cowardly to own up to what he said? You bunch are not men."

"If you are the example of a man, I shall take that as a compliment," Thiên Bảo interrupted suddenly. The guard turned to him.

"What did you say to me?"

"I said that you are the example of man that I could never be... and never hope to be."

The guard swung the blunt end of his rifle across Thiên Bảo's forehead, leaving a deep gash where he struck.

"We'll have to teach you to mind that mouth of yours."

Hùng saw the young boy's face deepen with rage, struggling to maintain his composure. He reached out and touched Thiên Bảo on the small of his back, hoping to calm the boy as to not provoke the guard further. But it was no use.

"You call this reeducation? You call this reuniting the country?" his voice was growing louder. "This is not redemption; this is revenge. This is—"

It happened so quickly that Hùng could only make out the bang of the gun before seeing Thiên Bảo on the ground. Even in death, his lips curled in a half-smile. The guard threw the corpse on the side of the road without a notice and motioned for the men to continue walking. Hùng had seen plenty of men tortured relentlessly or beaten to a bloody pulp in the camps but never had he witnessed one killed so readily. The guards of Cà_Mau would turn out to be the most provocative to the prisoners, but also the most volatile.

Though his anger burned the greatest in this time, Hùng bit his tongue until he drew blood and never said a word. The men who spoke back, who fought the leaders of these camps, perhaps they thought they were brave and valiant for holding to their beliefs. But Hùng couldn't take the chance that one day, he would die at the hands of their passions. He had a wife and a child and a family to live for and to protect. If Hùng learned one thing from reeducation, it was that sometimes, it is braver not to stand for what you believe in.

Minh: Cleverness

"Do you know Vietnamese?" she asked Minh as they walked along the dusty path home, stepping carefully to avoid the constant stream of motorbikes to the right.

"*Dạ*, of course Tenth Auntie," she replied proudly, "I can even read and write pretty well."

"Okay," Tenth Auntie laughed. Pointing to a sign, she asked, "What does that say?"

“Chợ Bình Minh,” Minh answered without pause. *Surely she didn’t think something as simple as the name of a market would trip me up.*

“Then, how about that?” she waved her hand in the opposite direction.

“Uhm, Tiệm Quần Áo Quỳnh.” A clothing store. Her aunt was clearly enjoying this.

“Last one. There.”

“Uhm, Phòng Khám Bệnh và Siêu Âm,” she stumbled a little over the technical terms, but her response was correct. It was a doctor’s office.

“Đổi quá! Good job!” Minh could tell that she had impressed her aunt and was rewarded with a large bag of sugarcane juice when they finally reached grandma’s house. She smiled to herself, proud that she wasn’t one of *those* kids.

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“Catch!” Tenth Auntie threw a plastic bottle toward Minh as she walked into the ‘kitchen’, a corner of the back shed consisting of exactly one gas-burning hot plate and a small fire pit. It was becoming a sort of game for the two for them. Tenth Auntie would try to catch Minh off guard and test her Vietnamese with little things like this.

“Nước Mắm Hương Giang,” Minh rattled off again. It was some brand of fish sauce.

“*Đổi quá,*” she called back. Auntie always coupled this response with a smile.

“*Mợ ơi!*” Minh cried, “Let me help you with something.”

She had been in Vietnam for nearly two weeks now and had barely lifted a finger. Then again, Tenth Auntie would barely let her, which only made Minh feel guiltier. Her mother’s younger brother, Tenth Uncle, had passed nearly three years ago, and her aunt was still relatively young. She could have found another husband to take care of her or returned

to her village, but she chose to stay, to take care of her children, the household, and Minh's grandmother.

"No, no," she cried, "These are bàn tay ngòi viết. Writing hands. You việt kiều aren't suited for this type of work!" Another smile and she returned to filling up a tub large enough to fit three of Minh with water.

"Come on Mợ Mườì. Give me a chance. I'm going to be in Vietnam for almost three months! I want to become a true Vietnamese!" It took a few minutes of persuasion and some jokes at Minh's small frame, but she finally gave in.

"Have you done laundry before?" Minh decided it was useless to counter with the fact that she did know how to use the laundry machine and shook her head instead. "Well here's your chance to be Vietnamese," she winked and returned in several trips with a plastic tub, a small bag of detergent, and a mountain of unwashed clothes.

"Can I trust you to figure it out on your own?" she asked, "There are directions on the detergent bag, but if you need help, I'll be inside."

"Auntie, don't you trust my reading by now?" Minh asked with exasperation.

"Yes, yes. I know you read very well. Okay, good luck." And with a pat on the back, she left Minh to her first household chore. As she measured out detergent and started to separate the clothes, Minh decided that she was well on her way to becoming a true Vietnamese after all.

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"Minh ơi! Wake up! Đọc cho Mợ cây này. Read this for me!" she spoke with an urgency that wrestled Minh from the last reins of sleep. When her eyes cleared, Minh found a jumble of papers in her lap.

“Bà ngoại fell in the bathroom this morning. I think she might have broken her hip, so I’m taking Grandma to the doctor. Help me find her papers,” she hovered over Minh as she spoke.

“Well.. I think this is her ID...” Minh held up a card.

“What does that say? Read it out loud,” She was pointing to another set of papers. Had Tenth Auntie gone mad? This was no time for games.

“I think.. these are insurance papers. But Auntie, I- I’m not sure. You should check,” Minh replied.

“I can’t,” she answered, looking to the floor, “I’ve never learned how to read.”

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“Trang?” Minh asked her younger cousin the next day, “You know how Grandma had to go the hospital last night, and no one else was home? And then there were all these papers, and it was so confusing!” By the look on Trang’s face, so was Minh’s retelling, “Well, I guess what I’m really asking is... why doesn’t Tenth Auntie know how to read?”

“Oh yeah, I forgot you don’t know. Tenth Auntie is Cambodian,” she whispered the word as if it were dirty thing. “She’s what we call người thiểu số, a minority. In the village where she grew up, the Khmer were heavily discriminated against, and even if allowed, her family wouldn’t have been able to afford school. Tenth Uncle married her even though Grandma threatened to disown him. In the end it didn’t matter that much because our family was very poor back then. But even now, Auntie tries to keep quiet about her ethnicity.”

Minh was stunned and as she went to bed that night, she pondered what it meant then to be Vietnamese. Had she been asked a month earlier, Minh would have said to be Vietnamese is to share Vietnamese blood, language, and culture. And in that definition, she’d

always believed that she qualified as such. Yet here was Tenth Auntie. She didn't have Vietnamese blood, she couldn't read the Vietnamese language, and yet she was more Vietnamese than Minh could ever hope to be.

The thoughts plagued her sleep until she finally crawled out of bed. Behind the kitchen was her aunt's room, and she knocked quietly. The door opened, and she could see that her aunt was not sleeping either.

"What is it Minh? Do you need me to help you with something?"

"Actually Auntie, I wanted to ask if I could help you with something.."

"What do you mean?"

"Please don't take this the wrong way, but I would like to teach you how to read and write in Vietnamese."

She looked at me in silence until a smile finally cracked the tension.

"Well you do have the proper hands," she smiled again, "I would like that very much."