Exploring Vietnamese American Identity and Political Affiliation: An Auto-Ethography on Experiences of Loss and Belonging
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Abstract

In this work, I, a second generation Vietnamese American, conduct an auto-ethnography of myself, my mother, and my grandfather on their political beliefs to gather qualitative data on shifting Vietnamese American political attitudes between generations. Through a series of interviews, I aim to determine to what extent Vietnamese American ethnic background has on individual political beliefs, if at all. Ultimately, I have found that it is not ethnic and racial identity that uniformly influence political affiliation; rather, it is the range of experiences in immigration and assimilation that affect said beliefs. I divide my findings into three core themes: the refugee experience, the Americanization experience, and the racial consciousness experience.

Introduction

In democratic contexts, voting patterns are often interpreted through fixed categories like gender, age, and race. Pundits discuss the “youth vote” or the various demographics that favor one or another candidate or political party. These identity markers are often said to play a role in political affiliation.¹ For marginalized groups, this is especially true, as demonstrated by a 2018 study conducted in the UK focusing on the experiences of people of color.² Current works disagree about the role of ethnicity in political affiliation. While some studies state that political affiliation is not heavily associated with ethnic identity, nor is there a heavy voting trend based on ethnicity, others studies argue otherwise.³ In Zambia, for example, a study conducted in the

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early 2000s notes that “ethnicity or ethno-political identity is certainly not the only, but one factor that accounts for election outcomes.”

In my work, I specifically examine Vietnamese Americans and correlation between the possible role of Vietnamese ethnicity in shaping American political beliefs. Studies such as those by the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund show that Vietnamese Americans typically lean conservative, being the most likely to vote Republican out of all Asian American ethnic groups. To understand the role that race and ethnicity might play in political affiliation, I ask: how does being Vietnamese American shape one's political beliefs? I find that the relationship between ethnicity and political decision-making or affiliation is not one-to-one, as pundits seem to imagine. Instead, I argue that the particular experiences which constitute Vietnamese Americans as such—including assimilation, Americanization, and racial awakening—can produce variable and complex political positions. By examining our experiences as Vietnamese Americans, I analyze how our ethnic background, alongside our refugee backgrounds, have shaped both our engagement in politics and our places within the political spectrum.

**Literature Review**

Current literature regarding Vietnamese American political beliefs and sense of identity primarily concentrates on the experiences of first generation refugees, with some literature on their immediate children. In this piece, I expand upon that perspective by adding my own family’s stories to the broader work on Vietnamese Americans, while paying special focus to my

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own experiences as a second generation Vietnamese American. I tackle refugeeism, assimilation and Americanization, and racial awakening throughout this piece, combining them into one fluid work.

Beginning with the refugee experience, my grandfather was imprisoned by the Northern Vietnamese Communist Party after fighting in the Vietnam War in the 1970s. Existing literature documents the impact of communism on Vietnamese American behaviors and political beliefs, alongside the circumstances leading to many Vietnamese Americans fleeing. This literature highlights the strong ties that Vietnamese American refugees in the US continue to feel with Vietnamese politics, having not truly left their homelands at heart. In the city of Little Saigon, the largest Vietnamese American community outside of Vietnam, Vietnamese Americans feel particularly close to Vietnam. A 2000 survey of Little Saigon showed that the well-being of those who remained in Vietnam remained a significant issue for virtually all those polled. In that same study, anticommunism was also spoken of as a key issue area by older Vietnamese Americans, though not as much within the younger generation. A different survey took place in San Francisco in 2000, where “more than two in five of adults over fifty-five and over one in three of adults over forty-five believed that “fighting communism” is a “top priority.” Difficult experiences under communism clearly made it a political issue for many Vietnamese Americans, specifically those who had more exposure to the harsh rule under the Communist regime. This

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desire to remain anticommunist translated into political action, with many protests revolving around anticommunism in the Vietnamese community. In 1999, for example, a 15,000 person protest took place against Little Saigon resident Tran Van Troung for having hung a portrait of Communist leader Ho Chi Minh in his shop. This protest was one of the largest political acts of the Vietnamese American community.\textsuperscript{10} Once again, despite living in America, Vietnamese Americans still felt passionate about anticommunism and experiences under communism in Vietnam. The difficulties of having to leave one’s homeland and cope with said trauma often lead to feelings of disbelonging. As journalist Mike Tolson argues, many first generation refugees “engage in homeland politics as a coping strategy for living in a difficult present.”\textsuperscript{11} This finding resonates with my work in focusing on feelings of belonging and community, specifically my grandfather. Through my work, I examine the differences between my grandfather, mother, and myself to see how variations in exposure to communist rule have affected our political leanings, alongside our sense of belonging and ethnic identity.

My work also examines how processes of Americanization shape political identity. I look at how my grandfather and mother describe being assimilated to American culture and the effects they think it had on their politics. Firstly, I look at feelings of community or lack thereof in the United States. Secondly, I look at their feelings of gratitude and patriotism for the United States as a result of the war, and how these feelings translate into assimilation experiences. Other scholars have found that tight-knit forms of community have resulted in a collective style of learning and support similar to that found in Vietnam and has resulted in improved health


outcomes for members of Vietnamese American communities. Kim Nguyen and Thuy Vo Dang both argue that anticommunism operates as a form of community and unity for many Vietnamese Americans. Here anticommunism is not rooted in actual political sentiment but rather a strategy for coping with the war that unified community residents. Anticommunism and patriotism are described as means of justifying the war and finding easier assimilation into dominant American culture. By seeing the war as necessary to fight off communism, the Vietnamese American community finds it easier to “Americanize,” accepting the position of the United States as saviors. Through seeing the US in such a light, it becomes easier to delve into and welcome American culture. As Vo Dang explains, “the mainstream U.S. media also serves up Vietnamese American anticommunism as evidence of the moral righteousness of the U.S. in the Vietnam War, thus allowing for a re-writing of the Vietnam War as a noble struggle for democratic ideals.” Vietnamese Americans’ economic and academic success is held up as proof of the validity of the model minority myth, in which Asian Americans are depicted as submissive, naturally intelligent, ideal minorities that are proof of the American dream. The use of this myth justifies US imperialism, showing that Asian Americans are supposedly better off in America than in their home countries. Current literature highlights the impact of the difficulties faced in Vietnam as a result of the war, noting it as reason for academic and economic excellence in the United States. Through comparing their experiences in Vietnam under communism to the lifestyles in America, Vietnamese Americans feel lucky and motivated to take advantage of the relative privileges in the USA. This is done typically through academic excellence. Centrie notes

that at a primarily Vietnamese high school, many students noted they came from “an oppressive situation where education and its articulation into a well paying job were unlikely; therefore, they were very appreciative of the education they received at West Side High.”

While delving into issues of assimilation, I also examine how racial consciousness may play a part in said assimilation and political leanings. Looking at existing research discussing the perpetuation of the model minority myth by many conservative Vietnamese Americans, I look at how my own family does or does not engage in such beliefs. I also focus more on my own experiences of racial consciousness, alongside my mother’s rather than that of my grandfather’s. My work also looks at racial awakening on top of racial consciousness, focusing on the circumstances leading to bringing my family to acknowledge their racial positioning in America. Given that much of the existing literature focuses on the experiences of those who experienced communism firsthand, I analyze how my mother and I hold beliefs similar and different from those of my grandfather. Primarily, I examine the role of racial consciousness and Vietnamese American identity in shaping how we perceive the world. One example of a lack of racial consciousness can be seen in the case of Anti-Asian hate during Senator John McCain’s election season. As Nguyen argues, many Vietnamese Americans refused to acknowledge the anti-Asian hate in the 2000s. According to Nguyen, this was a result of “Vietnamese Americans... dissociating themselves racially from Vietnamese in communist Vietnam and affiliating themselves with other American veterans of the Vietnam War.”

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stronger sense of belonging and community within American society. I explore this claim within the context of my own family’s experiences and further elaborate on how these themes of community and belonging vary through generations as said experiences shift and change.

Methodology

In this work, I analyze Vietnamese identity and political affiliation through an auto-ethnography, the subjects being myself, my grandfather, and my mother. To do this, I arranged two Zoom conversations with my mother and grandfather, which allowed for me to have the interviews auto-transcribed. The conversations were then revisited by me and edits were made as necessary to correct any errors made by the auto transcription. While my mother and I interviewed in English, my grandfather’s means of interview were different, as he primarily speaks Vietnamese. I had my mother sit in the same room with him and Zoom me, where I asked her questions she then translated into Vietnamese. He would respond in Vietnamese, and she would translate those answers back into English for me. As someone who does not speak Vietnamese myself, I found this to be a means of communication between myself and my grandfather that would still be comfortable for him. This also means, however, that there may be some issues in translation, given that the questions had to go through my mother twice before they were transcribed. I also note that my mother’s vocabulary in Vietnamese is rather limited, also keeping the conversation from going as in depth as it could have.

Throughout the interview, I asked them the following questions:

- What do you consider political?
- What are some examples of political actions you have experienced in your life? When was this action? Why do you consider it political?
- What political things do you support? What are you against?
- Do you see yourself as politically more right leaning or left leaning? Why so?
- To what extent do you think your parents may have shaped your beliefs?
- Do you think you have shaped your children’s political beliefs? How so?
○ Do you think your children have shaped yours? How so?
○ What past experiences may have influenced the way you think about politics?
○ What is one issue you consider to be especially important?
○ Do you have any voter issues that would determine your vote?
○ How do you feel about being American? How does it feel to be Vietnamese American? How do you feel about being Vietnamese in America? What does it mean to be Vietnamese in America?
○ How would you say your experience being Vietnamese American has made you think about politics?
○ Is there anything else I should know about that you would consider relevant to this study?

I chose to conduct this research in the form of an autoethnography in order to better understand my own family and roots, while also adding our stories into the larger Vietnamese American community at large. As touched upon in the literature review, a primary issue in smaller communities is that of erasure from the narrative. My grandfather, mother, and myself are able to tell our true stories and feelings through this format. As in all interviews, it cannot be said that every bit of data coming from the participants is factual-- as memory is flawed, so may be the data. To this, I hope to focus not so much on this factuality, but the presence of the story and its reality as narrated through the interviewee’s subjective experience. What relevance does this have to the storyteller? Why was this important for them to note? I aim to capture my grandfather and mother’s stories to produce “meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience”17-- to show the lived stories of my family in relation with other Vietnamese Americans in the larger community. I aim to have these stories resonate with those who read it and see themselves and their families reflected in the stories of my own. In other words, I use stories to make my argument because they illuminate “a shared humanity that

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reaches across, touches… a genuine understanding.” As a Vietnamese American myself, I believe that stories coming directly from the impacted community will be most powerful and raw. Oftentimes, work regarding marginalized communities is done by those in positions of power, who are outside of the community. Through this work, I aim to empower the stories of my family and reflect on my own identity and place within America.

**Data Analysis**

Throughout the interviews I conducted with my grandfather, mother, and myself, I found that a variety of past experiences which constitute personal identity shape the formation of certain political identities. My grandfather, mother, and my own experiences coming to America, assimilating to American culture, and exploring our racial consciousness have all been key in developing our varied political affiliations and identities. In this piece, I discuss each experience and its impacts on my family’s political beliefs.

**The Refugee Experience**

To begin, I analyze the experiences of being refugees in America with my grandfather and mother. Regarding political affiliation, my grandfather describes himself as strongly Republican, my mother as a liberal, and myself as a progressive/leftist. I argue that my grandfather’s extended experiences under communism, my mother’s limited experiences under communism having fled at a young age, and my own lack of experience in being a refugee as the daughter of refugees play a key role in determining our positionality. Lack of political knowledge as a result of being refugees coupled with trauma from the war have ultimately affected the ways in which my grandfather and mother view politics.

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I find it important to note that my mother and grandfather’s refugee background also influenced the education they received, making it difficult for them to engage in deeper political conversations throughout their lives. My grandfather receives his primary news from Vietnamese radio, but is unable to read or understand much English, limiting his ability to gain new information. My mother, on the other hand, is fluent in English but was never exposed to political discourse growing up.

The influence of refugee experiences can be seen even with initial questions regarding politics as a whole. To breach the conversation, we began by defining what “political” meant to each of them. Ultimately, my mother cited the examples of religion, abortion, and race as political; my grandfather primarily noted immigration. I found this to be important in that my grandfather had connected his own refugee status to being a prime political issue-- the first and only thing he could think of when someone mentioned the word “politics.” My mother, on the other hand, did not think of immigration at all, instead speaking about race in general. I myself tend to think about politics as heavily based around my own identity, often asking myself how certain policies will affect people of color, gender marginalized people, and so on. I analyze myself and my mother’s opinions of what being “political” is as connecting to our own statuses as racial minorities in the United States. Unlike my grandfather, who is more focused on his process of coming to the United States, my mother and I are both fixated on our lived experiences in the states ourselves. My mother describes her political affiliation as largely being influenced by her own compassion towards other people.

MOM: I could say I am a compassionate person, I am a very empathetic person and because of my strong empathy I can put myself in everybody’s shoes and understand where they are coming from. Everyone deserves some form of fairness.
After broadly defining what they found to be political in nature and their past experiences politically, I moved on to asking them more about their political beliefs and how their past experiences as refugees had affected them. I once again found that their lived experiences were major in determining which issues were of most importance to them. My grandfather brought up immigration and healthcare as being important issues to him, primarily reflecting on his own background as a refugee and current recipient of government aid. Once again, his direct experiences were reflected in his political ideologies. My mother was more broad with her answer, stating that she was in favor of anything that brought more fairness to people, whether it be passing bills that were about racial or gender based equality. This being said, my mother’s identity as a woman of color also came into play. Her experiences revolved more so about existing within American society rather than the issues that plagued her upon her immediate arrival in America approximately forty-five years ago.

When asking for their political affiliation, my mother stated that she was strongly liberal. My grandfather did not understand the words liberal and conservative, and so he was unable to pick one. Instead, he simply said he was a Republican. He stated:

GRANDPA: I believe in immigration, because there are people who need help and assistance, with people who have been in the war and so forth, who have family here in America and can be helped. But at the same time the Democrats keep on giving and things need to be earned, not given. The Republicans believe in earning. We do not need excess social programs, or giving more than we should. Immigration these days is unfair, like with Biden in office. Millions need help in America alone. Why do they keep letting immigrants through here? Democrats just want to let people in to get more votes and stay in power. Nothing needs to be cut really, we just need immigration control to help our people first.
My grandfather’s thoughts on immigration were relatively common in comparison to other older refugees who had experienced the hardships under Northern control. Though he was ultimately in favor of immigration for those who came as a result of war, given that he came from war himself, he appeared to be against immigration in other forms. He cited the Republicans as believing in “earning” whereas the “Democrats keep on giving.” This was notable in that he himself is a recipient of government aid and many social programs, ever since he came to America. He also stated that he did not believe in cutting any social programs, but instead stopping the flow of immigration. My grandfather appeared to mostly put blame on immigrants for issues within the system and resource distribution. He appeared to function within a scarcity mindset. My mother, despite identifying as strongly liberal, noted similar sentiments, but for different reasons.

MOM: All these undocumented people keep coming in when there are so many from other countries who want to come here! I support immigration, I do, but it is just unfair. There are so many people in Vietnam who have been waiting to come here. Why do people from Latin America get to come here first just because they are our neighbors?

Unlike my grandfather, whose hope for limiting immigration stemmed from a scarcity mindset, my mother spoke out of compassion for those in Vietnam who could not immigrate to the United States. In both cases, the sentiments my grandfather and mother express reflect their particular stories as refugees. In spite of both being refugees, however, the refugee experience is not singular. Rather, it varies widely depending on a variety of factors, as seen with my grandfather’s prolonged exposure to being on the battlefield. My grandfather’s reasons for identifying as a Republican are deeper than his stances on immigration, and are rooted primarily

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in his anticommunist sentiment. He stated that his most important priority is to always fight against communism, regardless of what other issues may be on the table. Prior in the conversation, he cited that reduced and free healthcare was of extreme importance to him; however, he later stated that he would choose to have a Republican in office who did not support free and reduced healthcare over a Democrat who did. He mainly ties his hatred of Democrats to his hatred of communism, correlating increased government control and power with communism.

GRANDPA: I have seen a lot, seen the North and how they invaded. Humanity is lacking in war, violent to the South, hurting so many people. I saw how the communists acted to my people and I hate communism. Their control was too strong, it was inhumane. The communists had too much control and the system should not allow control like that. The Democrats want more control, like the communists. The Republicans believe in civil rights and all that. When it comes to voting, I will always vote Republican because I was in the war and anti-communism is always the most important thing.

GRANDPA: Of course being Vietnamese has affected me politically. I lived under communism. I will not support anyone who is communist and will always vote that way.

To expand further, my grandfather and mother came to America as third wave refugees, three years after the Fall of Saigon in 1975. My grandfather was captured by the North and put in a re-education camp, where he was forced to perform grueling manual labor and nearly died. He was able to escape with a few others and he, alongside my grandmother and his children, were able to get onto a raft. From there, my grandfather, mother, and the rest of their family made it to Malaysia, then were flown to the United States through a sponsorship program, given that my grandfather’s sister had married an American veteran. Given that they were working class farmers, they were not taken in the first wave like my father, whose family lived in the city and
were white-collar workers. Unlike my father, who came by plane before the Fall of Saigon, my mother and other second and third wave refugees had a much more dangerous journey to the United States. Class played a large part in impacting the timing and means of leaving Vietnam. It is my grandfather’s experience having dealt with such terrible conditions that has made him hate the Communist Party to the extent that he does. It also explains his fear of government control.

Overall, my grandfather’s experiences under communism, my mother’s experiences as a refugee who spent limited time in Vietnam, and my own experiences being born and raised in America have heavily influenced our understanding of politics and our political affiliations. Because of these experiences, my grandfather strays away from anything reminiscent of communism; my mother and I remain significantly less affected.

The Americanization Experience

Apart from their experiences fleeing as refugees, I also argue that their journey assimilating into American culture also shaped my grandfather, mother, and myself politically. My grandfather’s ability to compare life in post-war Vietnam to that in America made him much less likely to criticize the American government. My mother’s assimilation journey, however, made her more willing to speak her mind in terms of what she feels dissatisfied with in America. Lastly, I feel incredibly empowered to voice my opinions on US politics, feeling a strong connection to my Vietnamese American identity.

One recurring theme I found throughout both my grandfather’s and mother’s interviews was that of appreciation for America. Both felt that America had allowed them to thrive much more than had they remained in Vietnam, and both made sure to thoroughly emphasize that point. Unlike myself, both my grandfather and mother feel that they are lucky to have been taken
in by America, and do not feel resentment towards Western imperialism in Vietnam. Rather, my grandfather sees America as having saved many Vietnamese people, with communism being the true enemy of the Vietnamese people. My mother spoke less passionately about communism, mainly focusing on the standard of living in the US being much higher than in Vietnam, and her appreciation to be here. During our interview, my grandpa stated the following:

GRANDPA: As long as I have lived here, I have felt very American. I came here and received work opportunities and was accepted pretty immediately, so I was always able to find jobs and it made me feel very equal. I feel equal in that I can make purchases and live life equally, just like an American. Makes me feel American. But I was brought up in Vietnam and that will always be closest to my heart first. My parents died there, my ancestors, my siblings, everyone has lived and died there and so my country will always be closest to my heart, even though I live here. I am proud to be Vietnamese.

My grandfather primarily describes his American identity as being given equal opportunity to work and earn as other American citizens are entitled to doing. He speaks heavily of his rights, which can be argued to be a core part of American values. It is possible that this passion about his rights stems from the lack thereof in Vietnam, under Communist rule. While he sees this equality as uniquely American, my mother and I disagree. My grandfather’s ties to his homeland still remain strong, regardless of the fact that he has lived in America for approximately 40 years now. He holds a duality in being Vietnamese and American, with his primary home being Vietnam. On the contrary, my mother describes how she feels more American than she does Vietnamese. Even so, she does not feel truly accepted as an American as a result of her race. She cares less about the written laws granting her equality-- rather, she focuses more on the treatment by individuals throughout her life, and how their microaggressions and societal beauty standards have impacted her feelings of belonging. Similarly, I focus on individual interactions and systemic racism and injustice as part of my understanding of self as a
true American. This is discussed further in the Racial Consciousness portion of this work. While my grandfather feels like a guest in America with a longing for his home country, my mother floats in a gray area of feeling culturally American but not accepted as fully American. She also mentioned a lack of connection of feeling culturally Vietnamese, given that she came to America at age five.

Throughout the interview, my grandfather often spoke of his gratefulness to live in America and the benefits he has received as a result of being an American citizen. Once again, he sees America as an adoptive country rather than his own. It is important to note that my grandfather has received government aid since the first day he came to the United States. My mother’s family was sponsored over to America because my grandmother’s sister had married a US veteran. They came to Virginia until my grandfather had saved enough money for them to relocate to Little Saigon, California, the largest Vietnamese community outside Vietnam. My grandfather compares his experiences to those in Vietnam often, as can be seen in the following:

GRANDPA: I am so grateful for what this country has given me. I am grateful. I should not take advantage of the system here, I should be grateful and appreciate whatever this country can offer. I have never felt lesser because I am a minority. This country has done so much, it is so much harder in Vietnam. I have freedom here.

Because of his experiences in Vietnam, he is able to further appreciate his experiences in the United States. Given the extent of the trauma he experienced in Vietnam, including his experiences in reeducation camps and the war, it is almost impossible for him to speak badly of the United States, even in an objective, critical way.

GRANDPA: I get government help, and I could use more, but will not ask for more. This country is kind to me and lets me live here and everything should be earned. I will not ask for more.
My mother noted similar feelings of gratitude for America after the war. Though she did not experience the same amount of trauma as my grandfather under communist rule, she does have fleeting memories of running through the jungle and escaping on the raft. My grandparent’s horror stories resonate strongly with my mother, and she empathizes with their experiences. She acknowledges that she came to America too young to remember most of the difficulties in Vietnam, but even so, knows she has more opportunities in the United States.

MOM: I was so young, to remember what it was like coming here, but I do really appreciate it. That I have become an American and been able to live here because I see the struggles of life and my parents history, and their lives. Being an American has given me a life I don’t think I would have had in my country.

I, on the other hand, have mixed feelings about the war and the role of the United States in it. Having been able to take various courses on Southeast Asia since attending college, I view the US not so much as a savior of the South Vietnamese people but as a player in a proxy war against the USSR. While my parents and grandparents had always framed US intervention as something done out of the kindness of the American people, I began to question this narrative as I grew older and educated myself further. I understand that I have many opportunities in this country, but I correlate many of the great things about America with the exploitation of marginalized peoples it has been built on.

Personally, I feel a strong sense of identity in being Vietnamese American-- not just Vietnamese, and not just American. I understand that I have a unique set of experiences given that I am a racial minority in the United States. Unlike many of my Vietnamese American peers in school growing up, I never learned Vietnamese growing up. It is often used against me to prove that I am whitewashed, or simply American. Yet, I take pride in being both Vietnamese and having been born in the United States. I accept not speaking Vietnamese as a part of my
identity, and connect with other Asian Americans who also do not speak the language of their ancestors. Culturally, I am American as can be, and I try to take pride in the specific identity of being an Asian American, alongside the Asian American culture that has bloomed as a product of cultural intersection between various Asian groups in the US. Unlike my grandfather, however, I do focus on the lack of whiteness I possess and how my race affects how people may perceive me as American. Like my mother, I do understand that whiteness and American identity are directly correlated. While my grandfather feels linked to Vietnam and America, establishing a dual identity, I feel a specific space of being Vietnamese American-- not feeling home in two countries, but feeling a singular home in America unique to me and my own racialized identity in this country alone.

In the interview, I also made a point to touch upon the generational differences between my grandfather, mother, and myself. Due to my mother and I being more culturally American, we feel differently about younger people informing us politically than my grandfather. To both my grandfather and my mother, I asked them to what extent they felt that their children and parents had affected their political beliefs. Their beliefs fell strongly in accordance with the data found by Nga Anh Nguyen in her piece on Vietnamese adolescents and their parents' values. Nga states that “obedience to parental authority” is a core value in older generations of Vietnamese Americans. This was shown when my grandfather stated that my mother had no influence on him politically, given that she was younger and he was therefore wiser.

GRANDPA: My daughter has not shaped my political beliefs, I have gained knowledge and wisdom over time to shape my own. My understanding, with age, is stronger than my daughters. But I respect what she believes.
He then went on to discuss how he had shaped my mother through what he had taught her growing up. He mainly emphasized the importance of simply bringing my mother to America, and how that had to have played a large role in determining her political activity given the rights she had acquired as a citizen.

GRANDPA: I encouraged my kids to know the importance of being citizens and having the ability to vote, you know, because we are citizens and should learn about everything that we can just by living in this country. I did shape my kids politically by bringing them to America.

This shifted with my mother, who enthusiastically stated that her children had affected her more than anyone else in terms of her political affiliation. Though I was unable to ask myself this question, not having children of my own, I also felt more similar to my mother in adapting a less traditional way of thinking. Unlike my grandfather, I have assimilated more into American culture, where the youth voice is more valued.

MOM: Oh absolutely, are you kidding me! I think my kids are probably the reason why I became so political, actually. I think they opened my eyes tremendously.

When discussing my grandfather’s effect on her own political beliefs, she stated that they did play a part in shaping her own; however, they played an interesting role in actually deterring her from adapting his beliefs. My mother did not understand politics growing up, as it was not often discussed in her household. However, as she grew older, my grandfather’s stances made her become more left leaning in opposition to his.

MOM: I would have to say that when I was younger, politics were never spoken about. So. Honestly, they have never shaped me politically growing up. You know, my mom was never political but my dad used to talk about being very conservative and Republican. And that is his strong belief and as a younger person I never really understood that, or what he meant by saying he was a
Republican. I would say my dad and I disagree on a lot of things and it makes me want to be more liberal, actually, as an adult.

My mother also noted her frustration with my grandfather’s refusal to acknowledge racism in the United States, and how his deep ties to Vietnam make it difficult for him to understand racism in the US. For example, my grandfather still feels a strong rivalry with China for having colonized Vietnam in the past; he does not feel a sense of solidarity with the Asian American community, seeing hate crimes against Chinese Americans as distanced from his own identity as someone Vietnamese. Once again, this ties into the Americanization my mother and I have experienced. Where my mother and I fully acknowledge the anti-Asian racism in America, my grandfather does not appear to acknowledge it. He also does not feel solidarity with other Asian groups. My mother and I, however, feel that Asian Americans are treated the same regardless of which specific country of origin they may be from. White people in America are unlikely to know the differences between Asian countries, and we understand we are largely subject to the same treatment.

My mother’s decision to get politically involved and speak up was sparked largely because of the past President Donald Trump, whose actions encouraged her to want to learn more about how our government works. I perceive this act as an American act, rooted in American values of free speech, protest, and dissent. She specifically cited his sexism as a reason for disliking him as our president. My mother stated that:

MOM: I felt unhappy with Trump as our leader. I really don’t like how the media portrayed him because they made him out to be some sort of character. He discriminated towards women. His remarks, his demeanors, I dislike him and because I have children I think about how he will affect your future. That made me start thinking more about politics, I guess.
Where my grandfather does not feel he has the ability to voice discontent for America, my mother and I have had incredibly different experiences doing so, largely as a result of our experiences assimilating to American culture. Unlike my mother, however, I feel an empowerment to make space in America as I continue living in the United States.

**The Racial Consciousness Experience**

Lastly, I analyze my grandfather’s, mother’s and my own moments of racial consciousness as experiences that have influenced political identity. As briefly touched upon in the prior section, experiences assimilating to America and developing a sense of identity were major for myself and my mother. While my grandfather felt that he remained Vietnamese only, my mother and I hold different opinions on being both Vietnamese and American, leading us to be more openly critical of the state of politics in America.

My grandfather chose not to heavily discuss his racial identity, feeling that being Vietnamese American did not heavily affect how he is treated in America. Though he acknowledges his immigration story as a refugee and how that has affected his anticommunist stance, he does not discuss his Vietnamese American background as having an effect on his day to day life.

**GRANDPA:** I love America. I do not feel there is racism here. I have always been treated as an equal.

My mother states that my grandfather has been the subject to racial slurs many years ago, back when they lived in Virginia, but has not since. It is important to note that my grandfather spent the majority of his past forty five years in Little Saigon, never leaving the Vietnamese community. He was also the one who decided the move was necessary, working hard to relocate
his family there after initially living in Virginia. His feelings of equality and acceptance may be partially due to these factors of having always surrounded himself with Vietnamese people while in America. I infer that his feelings of patriotism also keep him from criticizing the racial inequalities within the US. On top of this, it is also possible that my grandfather simply defines racism in different terms. As stated before, he sees himself as a true American because of his equal opportunity to work and earn as other Americans do; because he has not faced barriers to employment as a result of his race, he sees himself as equal. This is not to say people of color in America always have equal access to jobs and opportunities, as seen with the school-to-prison pipeline or the various studies showing that a non-European last name leads to a lower likelihood of employment; however, because my grandfather has not recently encountered this given his place of residence, he does not feel that racism has impacted him.  

Nevertheless, my mother felt much differently from my grandfather. Upon asking about how Vietnamese American identity has affected my mother and grandfather’s political beliefs, my mother primarily cited a feeling of erasure. She firstly brought up the apolitical stereotype of Asian Americans as a whole, discussing how Asian Americans are not pushed to be proactive politically.

MOM: If I were to say that I have experienced anything political I would have to say that I’ve always been kind of behind the scenes, never been proactive. I think the reason why I was never proactive is because of my lack of education and knowledge in politics, and being Asian. It’s a big thing too, because it's never really pushed upon Asians to be proactive. 

I, too, felt this growing up, never seeing Asian American faces represented in government. Being both Vietnamese and a woman, it was hard for me to find a face that looked 

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like mine in any form of media, the political stage included. The stereotype of Asian Americans being quiet and submissive proved to be true in some ways; growing up, my parents taught me that it would be best to stay out of trouble, and not involve myself in things that did not directly affect me. This proved to be true with my mother to some extent as well—it was not until President Trump incited Asian hate crimes that she truly became politically invested.

Initially, our feelings of being unnoticed as Asian Americans and being racially conscious of not being reached out to politically made us want to be less politically involved. As Asian Americans, we felt unseen and forgotten. Touching upon Vietnamese American identity specifically, my mother and I had almost identical feelings towards Vietnamese American political involvement. As stated in the prior section, my mother feels a sense of being forgotten as a Vietnamese American. She correlates this with a lessened desire to be involved politically, stating that the lack of recognition disempowered her.

MOM: Being Vietnamese makes me want to be less political when I know I should feel more political, right? But like I said, being Vietnamese means we are not recognized in a lot of ways, like people are always asking me “what kind of Asian are you?” and can never know where is Vietnam. Not just Vietnam, but other small countries too, they do not know where they are. And so people are not really interested in learning, you know, about that country and who they are. Being Vietnamese, I feel like a wallflower.

Growing up, I too felt this way. Having never learned about Asian American activists such as the work of Yuri Kochiyama or Frank Emi, I felt that there were no role models for me to look up to. Given that Asian Americans were not commonly discussed in political debates, but primarily white, Latine, and Black folks, I did not feel that I had the right to speak on many political matters. Being Vietnamese only further intensified this feeling of not belonging, as Vietnam was never mentioned outside of the context of the Vietnam war. When Asia was
mentioned, it would typically be about China or Japan, both of which have significant
differences from Vietnam. My mother notes, however, a strong desire to change this narrative.

MOM: I wish there were more outlets for Asian Americans to learn about politics. And be more proactive politically. Not just for Vietnamese Americans, but all Asian Americans.

Firstly, she feels culturally American, and does not feel much connection to Vietnamese culture. Where my grandfather never truly left the Vietnamese community, my mother did, moving to a primarily white area to raise her family after high school. Secondly, she also feels that there is a racial inequality in America that she has experienced first hand.

MOM: To be honest with you, I feel very American in that it's all I know. I came here when I was very young-- I think I was five and a half. And you know I didn’t really have other relatives, other than my own family when I grew up. So it's really just within our family. And even when I was very young around 10 and a half or 11, my parents divorced. I was pretty much on my own. So just being around my school environment and friends taught me American culture, and the American culture is what I understand. The Asian culture is more strict and different.

She also noted feelings of not belonging in America as a result of her physical appearance. Because she is obviously Asian, she did not feel that she fit in with the whiteness around her. She described not being socially accepted around her white friends growing up, and feeling different from her peers. She described feelings of inadequacy and striving for whiteness, whether that be trying to act more “white” herself or surrounding herself with more white friends.

MOM: Even though I feel very American growing up, you know, having white friends and going to the movies and the sports and all that, I have never really truly felt American in that I have always felt like a minority. In my eyes, growing up, to truly be American you have to look white, so if you don’t look white, then you are not so much an equal American, you’re a minority American. I have
experienced a lot of things that held me back because I look Asian, even though I’m fluent in English. I think that I was never socially accepted around kids that were white, in junior high, high school, because I was not white. It made me want to be white and love having white friends so that I could be equal and understand what really being American was like.

MOM: You know, not very long ago it wouldn’t have even occurred to me, but now I really care about racism because it made me reflect on my history and my life and my thinking. I always want to say everyone here is American and so there would be equality and we would unite, but in reality, everyone here is so different we have a lot to work towards racial equality.

She then goes on to elaborate further on her experiences as a Vietnamese American specifically, not just her identity as a person of color in America. She describes being Vietnamese as isolating, given that it is a small and relatively unknown country. Her feelings of erasure seem to contribute to her wanting to identify more so with being Asian American as a whole, rather than just Vietnamese. She describes the feeling that all non-Asian people, Americans specifically, do not recognize Vietnam.

MOM: Being Vietnamese is my culture and heritage and it’s okay… but living in America. Well, I have to say I am very fortunate to live in California because it is a very progressive state, but other states I would be fearful to live in. Because I am Vietnamese. To be Vietnamese is to be somebody no one recognizes. They recognize the Chinese and the Japanese, but Americans overall don’t recognize if you are Vietnamese, or where Vietnam is, or the culture. They mix us up and ask if I am Chinese, but never say “Oh! You are Vietnamese?” I guess we feel-- I feel-- a little outcast and not prominent because we are such a small country.

My mother noted the lack of awareness around Vietnamese Americans specifically, pointing to the small size of the country and the small representation in the media. She stated that everyone seemed to know about China, Korea, Japan, and so on and so forth, but that there was a distinct lack of conversation around Southeast Asian countries.
MOM: I almost like being seen as just Asian American more, because then I feel like I have a community. If they know Vietnam, they only know us for the war. I do not feel they know us beyond that, if at all.

This sentiment contrasts that of my grandfather, who does not feel a connection with the grouping of Asian Americans. As stated prior, he does not feel a sense of connection with, for example, the Chinese American community, seeing himself as distinctly different. Earlier, I discussed this as an example of resisting Americanization in contrast with my mother, who welcomes the solidarity between Asian American groups and feels a sense of comfort in shared resistance. This refusal to be grouped, however, could be seen as its own form of resistance from my grandfather. After all, the grouping of Asian Americans is done primarily through the lens of white supremacy, where Asian Americans have been stripped of their unique cultures and countries of origins, instead seen as a mass of “the East.” By holding onto the differences between Vietnam and other Asian countries such as China, my grandfather holds tight to his identity in his own way, with a perspective far different from both my mother and I. Both resisting and embracing the term “Asian American” exemplify the difference in racialization and assimilation that each of us have faced. Where I see resistance in forming a counterculture in Asian American solidarity and narrative, my grandfather resists by remembering the unique components of his homeland.

While my grandfather sees himself as a guest in this country, and my mother feels erased by it, I hope to carve out a place for myself and my people. I see myself as unabashedly American, having been born and raised on American soil and having invested fully into understanding the political workings of the United States. As someone who is incredibly politically active, having led voting drives, taken part in campaigns, rallies, and protests, I am determined to make America into a home.
Conclusion

Ultimately, my grandfather’s, mother’s, and my own experiences through refugeeism, Americanization, and racial consciousness all played essential roles in our understandings of identity and political affiliation. Analyzing my family’s various experiences and beliefs, we see that ethnicity and political affiliation are not always correlated. Despite us all being Vietnamese American, we all hold different understandings of what being Vietnamese American is to us; because of our varying definitions and feelings about being Vietnamese American, we differ in our political perspectives. The racialization of my grandfather, mother, and myself are unique to each of us, shaped primarily by our experiences in refugeeism and assimilation.

Though I understand that my family’s beliefs and experiences are unique to them and not necessarily representative of all Vietnamese Americans, I did see a pattern between my grandfather and other refugees' political beliefs, largely as a direct result of their experiences under communism during the war. As seen in the works by Dang, Nguyen, and Ong, those who came from the South after the war tended to primarily base their political identity around anticommunism. They also found identity in being anticommunist, seeing it not only as a political affiliation but as a community and way of life. My grandfather, for example, holds many traditionally liberal views, these of which include healthcare and government assistance. Yet, he associates liberalism with communism, causing him to identify with more conservative political candidates. In sum, those with shared experiences as my grandfather held similar political beliefs as a result, once again supporting my claim that political beliefs are more so based on the experience of racialization versus race itself.
Reflecting on my own identity as a second generation Vietnamese American and daughter of refugees, I find it incredibly important to carve out space for those with experiences similar to my own. Growing up, my cousins and I found solace in one another-- though we all look fully Asian, we feel a lack of connection to Vietnamese identity and culture. I often voice to my mother that if I were to visit Vietnam, I would be a stranger in the country. I do not see Vietnam as my own. Yet, I feel comfortable and confident in navigating American culture. I joke with my family and friends that I bleed red, white, and blue. As someone who is so politically active and invested in America, yet does not fit the neoliberal idea of what an American should look like, I have been working to understand my place in the United States. My lack of ability to speak Vietnamese as a result of my family’s assimilation to American culture is another unique part of my experience as a second generation Vietnamese American. In fact, this lack of speaking plays out throughout this study itself, with my mother’s Vietnamese vocabulary being elementary, and mine being nonexistent whatsoever. The methodology behind this study is yet another example of one of many paths being taken as a result of Americanization. It is, as stated earlier regarding the racial consciousness experience, a specific form of identity and experience that many second and third generation Asian Americans hold. When people ask me if I am Vietnamese, I clarify that I am Vietnamese American. I aim to claim the space of being not quite American and not quite Vietnamese-- it is not a gray area of disbelonging, but a place of its own. Those of us who do not speak our parent tongues, who identify with only bits and pieces of our native countries’ traditions and cultures, who can’t cite the histories of Vietnam but know the pledge of allegiance by heart, for those of us who have not been “home,” but rather find home in the ever-patriotic and complex soil of the United States, there is a space and shared experience that continues to bloom.
Regarding my mother’s comments on Asian American identity versus Vietnamese American identity, I also see this as a growing community and place of belonging. Rather than feeling close ties to specific countries, many Asian Americans are beginning to combine their shared experiences together. I do feel a sense of sameness and belonging with other Asian Americans, regardless of which country they may be from. This is not to say there are no differences— I most definitely see a difference in East and Southeast Asian American experiences as a result of the reasons for our migration to the United States— however, I do see a shared sense of support for one another. As stated by my mother, when she came to America, no one knew what Vietnam really was. Because Asian Americans are treated as a hegemonic mass under white supremacy, many of our struggles become shared; as race is conceptual, so is Asian American identity. Our combined experiences having been discriminated against by white America has established a solidarity and eventually, community of its own.

Through this work, I have been given the opportunity to reflect on my own family and our piece in the much bigger puzzle of the Vietnamese American and Asian American community at large. Our experiences coming to America and learning how to adapt to American culture has been incredibly important in creating community and identity within ourselves. As stated prior, it is not necessarily our race that influences our political identity, but the experiences individuals have had as a result of said racialization that lead to our ways of thinking and political affiliation. My physical lack of whiteness and appearance as a Vietnamese American has most definitely impacted the way I am treated, and therefore the way I understand race and American society. This, however, is an experience not shared by my grandfather, who prefers to avoid conversations of race entirely, despite holding the same eyes, nose, and skin tone as myself. As time continues on, I am interested to see if new experiences may change the current
beliefs of my grandfather, my mother, and myself. After all, discussions on race and identity are only growing more prominent in American society, especially post the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020. Specifically, I am interested to see if my grandfather will experience his own racial awakening, and what may lead to it. As we continue to accumulate more knowledge, perhaps our views will change, alongside our perceptions of ourselves. Overall, I hope that this work and the stories of my family may resonate with readers from similar backgrounds, or perhaps from different backgrounds entirely. I have been given the opportunity to examine my own place within America and the various experiences my mother and grandfather recounted as a result of this work. Through remembrance, storytelling, and reflection, I hope to continue carving out spaces within the dominant narrative for my family and the Vietnamese American and Asian American community as a whole.
Bibliography


