

“Why Did You Come to America?”

By Linda Lam

Why did you come to America? I remember asking this question to my mother for a 4th grade project. My mother replied, “Because of the Vietnam War, we decided to go to the United States.” From her responses, I always felt my family came to the United States by choice. As I got older and began to learn more about my own family history and through Asian American Studies, I realize that my family had to flee from Vietnam because of the war and the expulsion of Chinese from Vietnam. Because of my family’s refugee and American experience, my life course has been shaped by those events that occurred before my birth.

In Los Angeles Chinatown in the French Hospital, on April 14, 1982, I was born as the second and youngest daughter of my parents. Only three years before, my parents were working in a refugee camp in Macau for clothes and food waiting to establish a permanent home in whichever country that would accept refugees from the Vietnam War. Now, with very little money, they were in the United States of America, looking for better opportunities and the “American dream.” They had escaped a war torn country in order to provide for their children. One of those better opportunities was providing an education for their children. My sister and I grew up with a strong value and belief in education. My parents discouraged us from getting a job through out our educational careers because they did not want it to interfere with our studies. They would sacrifice to work long hours and at jobs that would ensure the survival of our family. My father works at a trophy company. My mother works as a seamstress. My mother would bring home pieces of clothing from work. The whole family would help her out. When I was

younger, I never knew of the exploitation in the garment industry. I always knew my mother worked a full day yet didn't get paid that much. My father would always remind us of our mother's sacrifice and hard work but never mentioning the inability for both of them to attain mobility in their lives. Maybe it was because they held onto their culture and retained their language or maybe it was because of their need to find work and support their family in the present. With my sister and me, we were able to delay our earning power in exchange for an education that would lead to better careers that would help support our family.

Because of my education, especially my education as an Asian American Studies major, and my involvement in the community, my views of the world and myself began to shift. Being refugees from Vietnam, my parents exuded a sense of gratefulness to the United States. The United States offered them a place to live when they were forced out. The United States educated their daughters and provided them with things that were hard to get in Vietnam. My father would remind my sister and me to brush our teeth because in Vietnam he did not get to go to the dentist regularly nor did he know to take care of his teeth. However, the United States had a vital role in Vietnam. The United States militarized the country and raped and exploited women. The United States had much self-interest in Vietnam but yet dehumanized those who lived there. The studying about the Vietnam War opened my eyes to the international relations that the United States has across the world. One example is the enlistment and abandonment of the Hmong, Mein, Pilipino veterans who fought for the U.S. The history of United States policies, domestically and internationally, affected not only me and my family but millions of people across the world.

The “discovery” of how my life and history intersects is a terrible lesson because of the Vietnam War, my parents involuntarily sacrificed their stability, their home, and their safety in order for a better life. Yet when my parents came here, they encountered more resistance and inequity. I carry this “burden” of trying to achieve their “American dream.” On the other hand, this burden can be turned into a fire and drive to do my best. My parents’ experience in the U.S. has given me the strength and heart to fight against injustices and to create an “American reality” that is true to its values. I cannot ignore that the United States continues to profit off of exploitation of people like my parents. This discovery of exploitation is a “terrible lesson” because humanity and respect for people are placed below profit and greed. I learn that I will not use my knowledge and my time to contribute in creating pain and suffering that I have felt in my own. I had always known that I would find a career in helping people. With this discovery, I want to help not only individuals but also the community. What happened to my family is caused by greater policies and institutions. If I were to just get a good-paying career, it would not address the institutional problems because the injustices that my family faces would still remain.

In order to create a new history for the future generations of Asian Americans, I will use my consciousness and take action. By taking action in organizing, in educating, in altering power structures, others and I are taking ownership of our own lives and the lives of our fellow humans. My activism is not isolated to my college years because my struggles go beyond four years. To be able to make connections and build coalitions with others based on race, class, sexual orientation, religion that want to create positive change is essential to creating a just society. To be able to create lasting change coalitions of all different kinds of areas are needed. I believe we need teachers who teach intersections, government officials who believe in social justice and the power of people, and corporations that value their workers and the environment,

and more. Whichever area I choose, I want to be able to utilize my awareness and consciousness to educate and mobilize others that lack the connection of history and self. No matter what I do, I will incorporate some aspect of social justice in my life.

The lessons I learn from my own life are the driving force for my passion for social justice.

Unfortunately, the uncovering of history is often “buried.” Through my “processing” and growth, I realize that the knowledge that I have gained is too precious for me to keep to myself.

This knowledge has empowered me to be an active agent of change.