

The So-Called Truth about Vietnamese Communists

By My Xuan Truong

I was born in a tiny village in Vietnam, so tiny that it did not even merit a name — my birth records state that I was born in a city ten miles east of the village, and my recorded birthday is actually incorrect. I do not know when I was born. My parents too cannot remember the exact date. My mother had other things to worry about, getting enough food for the day, for example. At the time, my father had to worry about not getting caught with a compass; after the war, the government declared compasses to be illegal; he had to bike 20 miles out of the village to buy a second compass; the first one was a fake that already had cost him a month's pay. This was the era after the Vietnam War, a time marked with a devastated economy, frequent government raids on civilian households and whispers of fleeing the country despite the soldiers who constantly patrolled the coast. This was the era that I was born into and the era that my parents made some of their greatest sacrifices to make me into who I am today.

I consider myself lucky. I never had to experience the hardships that my parents went through. I never had to experience the kind of paralyzing fear when one knows that one can lose one's future in an instant, whether it be a patrol boat merely 50 feet away, pirates on the open sea on route to the Malaysian refugee camp or missing your flight to America because your only child is in shock because her temperature is 110 degrees due to an allergic reaction to oyster. All of the things that I have told you thus far are stories and memories that my parents have passed down to me, and they are constant reminders of

the obstacles that my parents struggled to overcome so that I can live a better life than they did here in America.

Despite never actually experiencing the war first hand, the Vietnam War remains a constant presence in my life. I remember as a child my father would take me to school in the mornings and he would listen to the Vietnamese radio station and tell me how the Communists are ruining his beloved country. My father would tell me how great his country was before the war and how wealthy our family was until the new government seized everything. I remember my parents' anger during the Vietnam flag controversy when a video storeowner hung the Vietnam (Communist) flag in his store rather than the old (South Vietnam's flag before the war) Vietnam flag that flies all over Little Saigon. I remember the weekly dinner parties in which my father and his brothers would gather around a teapot and reminisce about their boyhoods in old Vietnam and lament Vietnam's current corrupted state. I grew up hearing my father bitterly criticize the Communist government, and I too learned to hate the Communists but to love Vietnam.

But as I grew older and after several visits to Vietnam, my views on the government have changed. The older generation who has experienced the war still hates the government and claims that the Communists exploit the people and only care about lining their own pockets; but now they feel that they are too old and powerless to fight against it. The younger generation are patriots; they take pride in their country, revere Ho Chi Minh and are convinced that the government is making real and steady progress towards a better future for Vietnamese citizens. This discovery jarred me to the core. The world in which I

had imagined my homeland to be was not a simple battle between the evil Communists and the helpless peasants. The younger generation's views made me question the so-called truth about Vietnam that my father raised me on, a truth that I unquestioningly gobbled up and took for granted. At that point, I did not know whom to believe. I did, however, have a sneaking suspicion that it is a mixture of both, though I confess that I could not be sure.

As I continue to take classes at UCLA, especially for my Labor Studies Minor, I am beginning to wipe the cobwebs from my eyes and I am beginning to understand that there is not a single truth but a complex one with many different colors. In many ways, by slowly coming to understand this and understanding that my father is not necessarily always right, that he suffered because of the war and therefore is biased towards the government, I then am able to understand that I must make my choices on what to believe and who to support. Of course, a disturbing question still remains: is it possible that the younger generation who attends state controlled schools has been brainwashed? I could not rule out the possibility. But perhaps more importantly, this younger generation has given me the ability to see beyond the criticisms of one man about an issue that my father and, to a certain extent Little Saigon, have for far too long oversimplified. As C. Wright Mills had said, discovering one's intersection with history is both "terrible" and "magnificent." It was terrible for me to discover that my truth about my homeland was really a one-sided conversation in which my father gave me his truth and realize that I did not know my homeland at all. As soon as I left the soil on that boat with my parents, I

became a stranger to my homeland in the same way that it is now strange to me. It is “magnificent” in that now I have the power to change that.

Recently, I have started to have a more open dialogue with my father. He tenses up and can be extraordinarily stubborn, but there are times when he genuinely considers my questions and admits that he does not know everything. It is a slow process, trying to encourage my father to keep an open mind about a war that has defined both his youth and adult life, but it is a start for the both of us. I am slowly letting go my prior notions about the Communists as well as my taught hate for them. I am looking towards a better future rather than dwelling on the past.

The Vietnam War undeniably changed my views on life and in extension has shaped who I am today. Without the war, I would probably still be in Vietnam with a totally different lifestyle, a different set of dreams and a different viewpoint on life. But the fact is, I am not in Vietnam; I am in the U.S. at UCLA as a result of this historical event that led my family to come to the States. When my life intersected with history at this point, it irrevocably changed my life. This awareness empowers me to open my mind, incite change and to understand that my life and my decisions can have a ripple effect in history. I have come to realize that there are no pawns in history — history is comprised of agents and I am one of them, and the way I tell my story about Vietnam will have an effect on those who come after me. I too have a voice in shaping history, and that, I believe, is truly magnificent.