

My Unificationist Memoirs - Chapter 7

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Vietnamese Boat People - 1975

Lan Pham came from a large family that had escaped from Vietnam in waves, by boat, and had been dispersed in refugee camps throughout Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Reunited through the international refugee agencies, the family had settled in San Francisco. Their family had owned a manufacturing business, a pharmaceutical glass company in Saigon. Though not large, they were successful and maintained business ties with Taiwan and Japan. Buddhist by faith, the children were sent to be educated in the French Catholic schools and universities. By osmosis, they had grown up with a Unificationist experience, melding their Buddhism with the daily practices of Catholicism. Despite the political animosities between the two faiths roiling Vietnam, a conflict which significantly contributed to the failure of the South Vietnamese government, they managed to maintain pure and open hearts. The family had left the North during the famine of 1945 (the Japanese military had stripped Vietnam of its rice crop to feed its armies) and had initially supported the Viet Minh struggle against the French. They, however, were not communists and viewed the purging of the truly nationalist elements from the Viet Minh with suspicion. Nonetheless, in April 1975, rather than try and flee the country, they placed their hope in a spirit of national reconciliation. Lan's father would say, "they are fellow Vietnamese and like us, they are exhausted by war." Nonetheless, the oldest son, Thai, took the family's store of gold jewelry and buried it under the factory floor. It did not take long for the father to see the wisdom in his son's actions.

Their hopes for a peaceful settlement of the war quickly dissolved when the Northern soldiers requisitioned most of their family home for a barracks. The soldiers treated them rudely, like a defeated enemy. Every conversation was laced with political rhetoric and devolved into a demeaning attempt at Marxist indoctrination. It became very clear that these young soldiers did not view them as "fellow Vietnamese." Rather, they were unreconstructed class enemies, quite literally, "enemies of the state." During this time, many families from Saigon were being sent to either "Re-Education Camps" or "New Economic Zones." (A cousin, also Lan Pham, ended up in a New Economic Zone on the Cambodian border, where she was given a stick and sent out to clear minefields - a death sentence. She escaped with her two brothers, walking across Cambodia while evading the Khmer Rouge, to freedom in Thailand... or at least to a refugee camp there). Lan and Thai's family avoided the re-education fate because the soldiers who seized the factory didn't know how to operate the machinery. The father and Thai began to teach them just enough to open the factory, but not everything needed to run it. Their survival depended upon protecting their position as a source of industrial knowledge. Any illusions they had about the communists evaporated as reports filtered back from the countryside on the conditions in the various camps.

The first of the Phams to try and escape was Lan's married older sister. Her husband had been a government official and their circumstances were particularly difficult. Despite her pregnancy, they heard of an opportunity to flee and traded gold for a means of passage on a fishing boat. Unbeknownst to them, the operation had been betrayed to the communists. They met on the docks at My Tho on the Mekong River and the boat's captain packed them into the fishing vessel, below the decks. Once they were in the channel and heading out to sea, the Vietnamese Coast Guard intercepted the boat. Already aware of the cargo and the intent to flee, the cutter simply opened fire, killing most everyone on board and sinking the fishing vessel. Lan's sister died that night. Her brother in law survived, swimming ashore. As I got to know Lan, she confided in me that her sister would appear in her dreams, holding her child and weeping.

The Chinese in Vietnam had always been a minority of the population but held a disproportionate share of the wealth and business ventures. Thus, they became a natural target of the communist government. In order to seize their businesses and claim their wealth, the government began to charge a \$2,000 per head bribe to leave the country by boat. Though a semi-sanctioned escape, crossing the open sea in small fishing vessels remained highly dangerous. Many of the craft sank, were swamped in storms, raided and destroyed by pirates, or once they reached their destination, towed back to the open sea by an unwelcoming host nation. Despite the odds, many determined it to be well worth the risk. Though ethnic Vietnamese, the Phams had always maintained close ties to the Chinese business community. The Vietnamese had invaded Cambodia and the communists were drafting southerners into the army to serve in the latest war. When Thai's position in the factory looked like it would no longer protect him from conscription, the family decided to act. Thai and Lan, with their younger siblings, their aunt and uncle and Nguyen cousins, paid for passage with a Chinese business associate disguised as part of his extended family. They surreptitiously set to sea at night from My Tho and successfully made the journey to Malaysia and a refugee camp.

When Thai's parents and younger brother Hiên escaped, they were not as fortunate. They safely left Vietnamese waters but once in the Gulf of Thailand, they were attacked by Thai pirates. The pirates boarded their fishing vessel, murdered several people and stole all of the gold from the refugees. They then destroyed the ship's engine, tossed over their stores, and set the vessel adrift on the open sea. The elderly began to die from hunger and thirst. They saw fishing vessels on the horizon but were terrified to seek assistance because many of these doubled as pirates. Finally, recognizing his parents' increasingly desperate condition, Hiên determined to seek help from a fishing vessel. He swam across to the boat thinking he would likely be murdered. Instead, they rescued them and brought them ashore in Malaysia.