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Memphis Made:
Four Decades of Vietnamese Identity in the City of Good Abode

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Immigrants choose to come to a new life, whereas refugees are forced to flee—often for their lives. Vietnamese refugees left their old life, not freely, but because they were persecuted or feared being persecuted... Had they not felt threatened they would not have left. - James Freeman, *Hearts of Sorrow*¹

Before Saigon and the South Vietnamese government fell to North Vietnam in 1975, there was no Vietnamese community in Memphis. Today, after four decades of immigration, the Vietnamese make up a very small percentage of the total Memphis Metropolitan Area population—less than one-half of one percent.² Because the community today is small and independent, however, it is often viewed not as a complex combination of groups and sub-communities, but as a monolith with a shared history and experience. Yet studying the characteristics of this community more closely demonstrates that the seemingly unitary community actually possesses the same kind of nuances and differences that make up any community, large or small.

This paper examines the various divisions and places those distinctions within the context of Memphis from the time of the first arrivals in 1975 to the present. It pays particular attention to religion and generation as factors that demonstrate both the continuities and changes that have defined this vibrant and underexplored group of Memphians. Secondary research will provide the theoretical and historical framework for the Vietnamese experience, both before emigration and after, while interviews with local residents, photographs of relevant material, and the author's narrated experiences will

¹ James Freeman, *Hearts of Sorrow: Vietnamese-American Lives* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 11.

² U.S. Census Bureau, "2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates."

provide specific information about the experience of the Vietnamese in Memphis and their place in the city.

The first Vietnamese refugees arrived to a city in the midst of a great transition. At the beginning of the 1960s, Memphis was considered one of the premier cities in the American South. Despite the heightened racial tensions around the country during the Civil Rights movement—especially in the South—for the first part of the decade Memphis largely stayed out of the headlines. Local leaders, observing the vitriolic confrontations that accompanied lunch counter sit-ins, bus boycotts, and other acts of civil disobedience in neighboring cities, took heed of the sustained activism from the local black community and its white allies and, as a result, voluntary desegregation occurred in much of Memphis before the Civil Rights Act of 1964.³ In 1968, however, a racially charged sanitation strike attracted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to the city where, one day after delivering his iconic “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, King was shot and killed. In fall of the following year, thousands of students and teachers boycotted Memphis city schools in a series of Black Monday protests to bankrupt the district.⁴ In 1971 during an arrest, police beat and killed Elton Hayes, a seventeen year-old black boy, resulting in the largest race-riot in Memphis since 1866.⁵ While most southern cities were wracked by similar conflicts, the killing of King gave Memphis a particularly bad reputation, and any notion that Memphis represented a racially progressive city disappeared.

³ Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.: 2000), 55-56.

⁴ Bobby L. Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 85.

⁵ Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 56.

The contentious atmosphere led to racial polarization in the city, just as it did for much of the United States. Large numbers of white, predominantly middle-class residents left for the suburbs, leaving the inner city a shell of its former self, and the implementation of school busing programs in 1973 resulted in 40,000 white students leaving the public school system in four years.⁶ As a result of “white flight,” the renewed division of neighborhoods, schools, and workforces left the two communities as physically separate as ever.⁷ Those same racial lines came to define the political landscape, too, as Civil Rights leaders mobilized the black voting bloc in an attempt to shift “from protest to politics,” and for the subsequent two decades white and black constituents voted almost exclusively for their respective candidates.⁸ When scholar Andrew Hacker declared that in late-1960s America there existed “two nations: black and white, separate, hostile, unequal,” that designation surely applied to Memphis.⁹ Memphis was racially polarized, and the two poles were very clearly the African American and White populations.

This was the political and social climate the first Vietnamese refugees had to navigate beginning with their arrival in 1975. But the Vietnamese were no strangers to struggle, either. In only the previous two centuries, the Vietnamese weathered French conquest and colonial rule; Japanese occupation; war against the French and the simultaneous communist transformation of the north; and finally a resumption of hostilities—this time with American involvement—resulting in ultimate defeat and destruction. In the hectic weeks, days, and hours before the fall of Saigon, the United States

⁶ Sam Dillon, “Merger of Memphis and County School Districts Revives Race and Class Challenges,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2011.

⁷ Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 79.

⁸ *Ibid*, 80-85.

⁹ Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1992).

staged a frantic effort to evacuate all American personnel, as well as those Vietnamese closely associated with American occupation—in other words, those most at risk of North Vietnamese retribution. Despite any lingering resentment against the Americans for supporting the autocratic South Vietnamese government or abandoning the war effort, the rapid advance of the communist forces towards Saigon meant a seat on a plane, helicopter, or boat out of Vietnam was a coveted commodity, and ultimately some 130,000 evacuees were removed before April 30. The refugees then lived on military bases repurposed as temporary resettlement camps where they awaited local sponsorship before continuing to their new homes. On July 19 of that year the *Commercial Appeal*, Memphis' primary periodical, announced the city had welcomed 59 refugees.¹⁰

To many Americans, the refugees embodied the Vietnam War and the conflicts over that war at home, but for Vietnamese who were resettled in Memphis there existed unexpected parallels that bound the refugees and their new hosts together. While the refugees entered as symbols of a controversial and destructive conflict that many Americans would just as soon forget, Memphis had become a symbol for a more domestic black eye: national divisions between black and white. In fact, the Vietnamese were in the ironic position of being able to empathize with the plight of African Americans in the Jim Crow South better than white Memphians could. One Vietnamese immigrant, attending an American university in the 1960s, recalled the uncertainty she felt the first time she traveled to the South and was confronted with bathrooms marked “Whites Only” and “Colored.” Standing there hesitantly, it dawned on her that the French had treated her people the same way, “treating us as inferior and keeping us down.” She promptly entered

¹⁰ “Refugees Arrive,” *The Commercial Appeal*, July 19, 1975.

the “Whites Only” bathroom, refusing to once again be branded as some “undesirable category.”¹¹ The Vietnamese were traveling thousands of miles from home, but in some ways their new environment was not so different from the society they left; abstractions like race, nationality, and culture united the two experiences more than immediately meets the eye.

By the end of December 1975, all evacuees of the so-called “first wave” were resettled with sponsor families.¹² There was a relative lull in the number of people fleeing Vietnam after the initial surge. From 1975 to 1977, fewer than 20,000 escaped, most of whom crossed land borders to neighboring countries.¹³ Those who remained in Vietnam experienced subsequent wars with Cambodia (1978) and China (1979), as well as a series of natural disasters between 1975 and 1980 that crippled the agrarian economy still paralyzed with unemployment after the withdrawal of American war dollars. Most seriously, somewhere between one-third and one-half of the southern population, particularly urban residents, were forced to relocate and submit to “reeducation camps” where they were subjected to a combination of ideological brainwashing and forced labor that occasionally lasted as long as two decades.¹⁴ This traumatic series of events resulted in a second large wave of emigration, and by the end of 1982, nearly one million refugees had made their escape, with 678,057 coming to reside in the United States.¹⁵ Most Vietnamese who managed to escape the country during this wave of emigration did so on

¹¹ Duong Van Mai Elliott, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 285-6.

¹² Sucheng Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight and New Beginnings* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 64.

¹³ SarDesai, *Vietnam*, 213.

¹⁴ D.R. SarDesai, *Vietnam: Past and Present* (Los Angeles: Westview Press 2005), 126.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 213-5.

boats, though it was not simply a matter of paying the fare to board a vessel headed abroad. The majority of boats used to escape were small, overcrowded fishing boats not fit for the high seas, and as a result, some estimates suggest between 200,000 and 400,000 refugees died at sea, either from starvation, disease, drowning, pirate attacks, or upon being apprehended by the communist government.¹⁶

The experiences of the Vietnamese who came to Memphis during this period were no less difficult. Doan Dinh's experience reflected that reality.¹⁷ He attempted to escape seven times from 1975 to 1980, all before he graduated high school. Each attempt required the family to find a willing carrier and to save up sufficient money to pay the requisite fee, and since they could only afford to pay for one fare, Doan was selected from amongst his siblings given his elder status. He had his eyes set on the clergy, an occupation forbidden to him by the communist government, so he hoped to come to the United States, work five or ten years to establish himself, and enter the seminary.

Several of Dinh's unsuccessful attempts resulted in the boat captain taking the trip fee and disappearing, setting the family back with nothing to show for it. Another time, Dinh managed to board a boat with untold others, only for the voyage to be canceled on account of treacherous weather. Each time he left home he had to face the unenviable task of saying goodbye to his family knowing full well a successful launch would likely mean never seeing them again—either on account of a successful escape to an uncertain future in America, or at the hands of one of the many potentially deadly threats he would face. On the final and ultimately successful attempt, word had somehow spread throughout the

¹⁶ Nghia M. Vo, *The Vietnamese Boat People, 1954 and 1975-1992* (McFarland & Company: 2005).

¹⁷ Doan Dinh, in conversation with the author, November 18, 2015.

village of their impending departure. When Dinh arrived to the loading point, a thick crowd pressed against the entry point trying to plead, bribe, or sneak their way onto the small fishing vessel. Eventually so many people managed to come aboard that the captain announced they were over capacity and would have to cancel the trip. Dinh, incredulous at the thought of yet another failed attempt, asked his cousin if the trip was really canceled. His cousin responded that it was, but when he spoke it was with unwarranted emphasis, signaling in his response that the trip was still on. Doan played along and disembarked, only to circle around the boat and jump back into the cabin. Sure enough, after some delay the ship pulled away from shore. After three days and nights at sea the vessel reached international waters. Occasionally a large freighter would pass by without stopping, not wanting to deal with the hassle of refugees seeking political asylum. Finally one freighter did stop, but when the small boat of refugees approached they saw the flag of the Soviet Union emblazoned on the hull and sped away in fear. The following day a large oilrig en route from Singapore to Hong Kong stopped and rescued the refugees, hoisting them aboard the ship one at a time. On deck the crew lined them up in rows and counted them—ninety in total, ranging from a two-month-old child to a seventy-year-old man.¹⁸

Boat people who survived the treacherous journey out to sea often had to wait long stints—sometimes several years—in refugee resettlement camps in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Japan until a host family would sponsor them, or a government program had space to accept them and bring them, finally, to their new home in the United States. Doan Dinh elected to continue on with the freighter to Osaka, Japan, rather than remain in Hong Kong—a touch too close to communist China for his comfort.

¹⁸ Ibid.

From Osaka the Red Cross transported the remaining refugees to a large camp in Nagasaki, where Dinh would proceed to live for the following year. The experience, in his words:

I was still single, no family, and this was the most painful experience for me in the refugee camp. The loneliness and the homesickness, you know. Homesick is painful, when you are forced to leave your country, your homeland, your family, and no family member with you, and because of the communist you don't know when you will be able to see them again. I mean, there's no future at all, you know, and it's a whole painful feeling when I was in the refugee camp. The homesickness feeling... the homesick feeling, yeah it's terrible...

After his bleak year in Nagasaki, Dinh traveled to Houston where he joined his uncle, a former employee of the Americans who was granted safe passage before the fall of Saigon.¹⁹

This is just one of many stories fraught with similar hardship that sheds light on the mindset and experiences of refugees arriving in Memphis. In light of this odyssey of entanglement, it is unsurprising that when Vietnamese-American historian Duong Van Mai Elliott wrote a narrative of Vietnam using interwoven narratives of the last four generations of her family, it occurred to her the common thread that ran through each family member's account was "the struggle to adapt and survive in the face of upheavals that more than once turned their world upside down, and the attempt to make the right choices for their families, for themselves, and for their country, often in very confusing circumstances."²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Elliott, *The Sacred Willow*, xi.

It is altogether reasonable, then, that many Vietnamese living in Memphis do not seem to have been particularly preoccupied with the racial battlefield playing out in their new backyards. Over the course of numerous interviews, no respondent explicitly cited the complicated tensions in the city as affecting their quality of life during the early years of residency in Memphis. The concerns of opportunity and fair treatment that led the black community to protest publicly and organize politically amongst themselves, or the concerns of safety that led the white community to relocate from the inner city to the suburbs, were not so different from the same concerns of the Vietnamese just arriving to Memphis in the 1970s and 1980s. True to form, the parallel plights of the Vietnamese and Memphians did not intersect. For Memphis and its citizens, realizing the promise of equality was a matter of human dignity—a struggle the Vietnamese understood well. But for Vietnamese refugees—separated from family and friends, with little to nothing to their name, and forced to begin life anew in an unfamiliar country—the search for human dignity had to begin with rediscovering what it meant to be human.

That is not to say, of course, that the experience of Vietnamese immigrants was not dramatically affected by the delicate circumstances in Memphis at the time of their arrival. In an effort to cope with the influx of refugees, four national religious organizations—Catholic, Jewish, Methodist, and Lutheran—contracted with the government to assist in resettlement efforts, providing necessities like housing, food, toiletries, clothing, and transportation, as well as occasional employment opportunities and English language classes.²¹ In Memphis, the Catholic diocese took a leading role in resettling refugees, and as a result the Midtown neighborhood surrounding the Catholic Charities headquarters at the

²¹ Jerome Wright, "Refugees Find City 'Strange' But Friendly," *The Commercial Appeal*, June 16, 1975.



Figure 1: Sacred Heart Catholic Church, at the intersection of N. Cleveland Street and Jefferson Avenue.

intersection of Jefferson Avenue and Cleveland Street became a central hub for the Vietnamese community (Figure 3).

During the very moment when many Memphians were abandoning the city in favor of the suburbs, new Vietnamese immigrants found the Midtown area to be a site of community support and individual opportunity. Many of the first refugees lived near the Catholic Charities headquarters, and so future Vietnamese arrivals chose to live there as well, or moved to the neighborhood when they had the chance. This physical proximity aided the transition for many of the arrivals, enabling them to live amongst refugees with similar experiences and difficulties, not to mention a shared linguistic and cultural background. Along this block there emerged the first Vietnamese grocery store, and

several Vietnamese restaurants followed in short order, some of which remain today.²² Sacred Heart Parish, situated on the same intersection directly across the street from Catholic Charities, came to serve the Vietnamese Catholic community (Figure 1).²³ Just on the other side of Cleveland Street is the first Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Memphis, Chua Chanh Tam, retrofitted from an old apartment building (Figure 2). Unbeknownst to the new residents, their ready-made community was a direct result of the tumultuous previous decade of heightened racial tensions, white flight, and urban decay. Large blocks of low-rent housing were made available by the shelling out of the inner city following King's assassination and continuing into the 1970s. The initial federal policy for Vietnamese resettlement was to disperse the refugees around the country with the hopes of accelerating assimilation, though that approach shifted as it became clear the importance of ethnic clusters for Vietnamese identity.²⁴ Thanks to available blocks of housing and local resettlement efforts, however, the Vietnamese community in Memphis was able to grow as a physical community from the start.

Still, even with the shared physical spaces and the aid of charitable organizations, the transition was hard on the refugees. Returning again to Doan Dinh, he suggested that the only comparable experience with the intense sadness of his stay in Nagasaki was the fatigue he felt during the early 1990s in Memphis. After arriving in Houston he filled up his time working and taking English language and general-education classes at Houston Community College, and after three years he was accepted into seminary at the University of St. Thomas in Houston. As he progressed through seminary and approached his

²² Anna Byrd Davis "Energetic Chef Opens Vietnamese Restaurant," *The Commercial Appeal*, August 12, 1981.

²³ All photographs not otherwise attributed were captured by the author.

²⁴ SarDesai, *Vietnam*, 224.

ordination as
 a deacon, he
 began to
 question the
 path he had
 chosen, and,
 after meeting
 his future
 bride, Mai



Figure 2: Chua Chanh Tam, on the intersection of N. Cleveland Street and Jefferson Avenue.

Lin, he realized priesthood was not the life for him. But the passion to help others—particularly those who had shared his experiences—remained with him. Shortly thereon, Dinh migrated to Memphis for a job working with refugees. Within a few years Dinh found himself utterly exhausted, a mental state he now attributes to “working like [he] was still single,” despite the many additional hours devoted towards earning his Master’s degree in clinical social work and spending time with his wife and two infant daughters.²⁵

²⁵ Dinh interview, November 18, 2015.

Many refugees reported experiences similar to Doan Dinh's during their initial years in Memphis, and by nature nagging feelings of isolation and homesickness—common sentiments—exacerbated any additional physical strains, like discomfort during the cold winters, or psychological burdens, like financial hardship.²⁶ Thang Khuu came to the United States optimistic

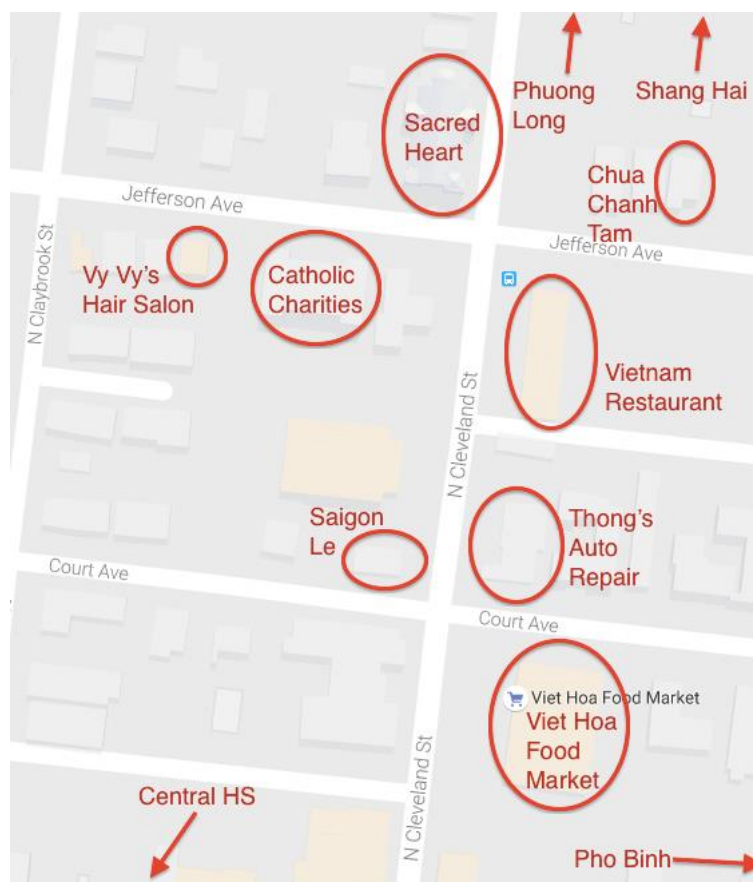


Figure 3: A map of the Midtown area highlighting key landmarks of the Vietnamese community.

that with a strong work ethic and persistence he could establish himself in his new home the way he had in Vietnam, where he worked as a well-paid and highly-respected engineer. After two years of trying to balance low-paying sixty-hour work weeks with night classes at Memphis State University, however, he buckled under the psychological and physical strain. In a story for *The Commercial Appeal*, Thang Khuu admitted he had to make a change: "I can't labor all my life like this."²⁷ Another article described the plight of Tuyet Le, a 16-year-old refugee, who found out about the death of her brother in Vietnam but did not have the language skills to communicate her situation with other students or teachers

²⁶ "Viet refugees here called 'very happy,'" *The Commercial Appeal*, May 30, 1976. And: Doan Dinh and Ms. Le, Vietnamese refugees, in conversation with the author.

²⁷ Michael Lollar, "Le Tuyet Adopts Another Country On a Day Full of Mixed Emotions," *The Commercial Appeal*, May 2, 1975.

at school, a situation that left her more alienated than ever.²⁸ Anecdotes like these abound, and they corroborate and expand on a Senate subcommittee report that claimed initial optimism among refugees had given way to “frustration, failure, loneliness, and general depression.”²⁹

That report, issued in 1976, referred to the circumstances of first wave refugees who, aside from having escaped before the communist takeover, were statistically more educated, more proficient at English, and wealthier.³⁰ In other words, they should have been the most prepared to assimilate into American society. But later waves of refugees benefitted in a massive way from the groundwork laid by the first arrivals. Some of the same issues existed for refugees arriving at any point—cold weather, for instance—but others did not, or at least not to the same degree. Though on the one hand many refugees felt overburdened by long hours, on the other hand they were, at least, finding work. In fact, the same inner-city economic decline that afforded refugees the opportunity to create a physical community, also made available employment options previously filled by now-departed residents. The Vietnamese quickly made their mark, and in August 1975 the *Commercial Appeal* ran an article recounting the positive impressions the immigrants had made on the business community.³¹ Refugees quickly worked to assemble a social network, too, and in November of 1975 more than 120 Vietnamese formed a club through

²⁸ Peggy Burch, “Language Barrier Impedes Resettlement of Vietnamese,” *The Commercial Appeal*, November 11, 1975.

²⁹ “Viet refugees here called ‘very happy,’” *The Commercial Appeal*, May 30, 1976.

³⁰ SarDesai, *Vietnam*, 218.

³¹ Ruth Jacquemine, “Refugees Find Job Problems,” *The Commercial Appeal*, August 22, 1975.

which they could plan activities and share common interests.³² Those sorts of contributions to the community's relationship with Memphis, while hard to quantify, would inevitably smooth the path for future arrivals.

The first refugees arrived in a Memphis shaped by the proceedings of the Civil Rights movement that left the city a shell of its former self. Within that shell existed niches waiting to be filled, and the industrious and eager first wave of Vietnamese refugees, despite their initial hardships, took advantage of those openings by creating a physical community that accommodated their own emotional needs, and the subsequent needs of culture-shocked new arrivals: recognizable food, places of worship, and familiar social life. Ensuing Vietnamese immigrants to Memphis, despite being statistically less likely to be financially secure or equipped with English language skills and higher degrees of education, would find more anchors to their old lives that enabled them to adapt more easily to Memphis. The city adapted to the Vietnamese, too, an adjustment reflected by Central High School. Due to the high numbers of Vietnamese and Latinos, among others, living in Midtown—within Central's zoning district—the school became the city's primary ESL institution, still another way in which refugees were able to have a strong communal environment in Memphis.³³

Media coverage reflects and confirms the evolving position of the Vietnamese in Memphis, suggesting a community increasingly at ease in their environment. *Commercial Appeal* archives yield numerous editorials and human-interest stories on the transition of the Vietnamese arriving in the years immediately following the fall of Saigon, but

³² "Area Vietnamese Refugees Meet to Form Club," *The Commercial Appeal*, November 13, 1975.

³³ Mary Phan, in conversation with the author, July 16, 2016.

dramatically fewer even by the early- to mid-1980s. This trend is in reverse of the population statistics, which, after an initial surge with the first arrivals, followed a steady climb, and by 1990 roughly 1,000 Vietnamese lived in the area.³⁴ But the following decade witnessed a sharp increase, and by 2000 Catholic Charities estimated between 8,000 and 10,000 Vietnamese in the region, attributable in part to continued emigration from Vietnam, but more significantly to internal migration within the United States and rising birth rates—both of which imply the success of the community.³⁵ Despite the climbing population, media coverage decreased as the Vietnamese assimilated into the local culture and were no longer an oddity. Aside from boding well for their adjustment to western life, the relaxed coverage dissipated the stigma of the Vietnamese as outsiders who were not a part of Memphis. In the eyes of the locals, the Vietnamese presence was increasingly part-and-parcel to the identity of Memphis, a shift simultaneous to the growing comfort of the Vietnamese to their new home.

Allowing Vietnamese immigrants to recede from the spotlight and return to some status of normal has the parallel effect of allowing for a more natural diversification amongst themselves. Immigrants from any nation, regardless of the broad range of backgrounds, beliefs, and perspectives they may offer, will inevitably have their

³⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, “Memphis Population Statistics 1990.”

³⁵ The 8,000 - 10,000 figure comes from Julie Hunter, “Vietnamese in Memphis: Juggling traditional and new cultures in the isolation of America.” *Mosaic Magazine*, April 2001, 5-8. But accurate statistics are notoriously hard to come by for immigrant communities, particularly more recent ones, and that pattern holds true for the Memphis Vietnamese community. I have been given anecdotal estimates of anywhere from 7,000 to 12,000 in Memphis, which more closely corroborate the Catholic Charities’ figure. But the 2000 Census records only 2,529 Vietnamese, and the 5-Year Estimate released by the census in 2015 predicts 5,100 Vietnamese. It is likely there was a similar discrepancy for the quoted 1990 population, though regardless it is clear that decade witnessed a notable uptick in numbers. For more, see: Adrian Scaife, “Grit and Grind: Vietnamese Refugees and the Process of Community Formation in Memphis,” *Rhodes Historical Review* (2016), 12.

experiences and identities' simplified to some degree by the locals when entering a culture foreign to their own. Nevertheless, those differences remain, irrespective of the popular conception, and affect the development of sub-communities within seemingly monolithic immigrant groups. An examination of community dynamics based on religious affiliation and heritage demonstrates this divide, as does an analysis of generational differences. Much of the remainder of this paper will explore those characteristics and their effect on the community's place in the city.

In Memphis, the community is composed primarily of a Buddhist majority and a Catholic minority, as well as smaller numbers of Protestants and irreligious members. Naturally, these groups interact with each other in various contexts, and the members of any one religious group are also members of other sub-communities that include representatives of multiple affiliations. The exchanges between these groups in large part dictate the experiences of the Vietnamese in the region, and as the communities evolved and continue to evolve their networks become more or less interrelated. But before discussing the way they interact in the present, it is first important to understand the long history of conflict between various religious affiliations in Vietnamese history.

The earliest religious history in Vietnam is comprised of local animistic and totemic practices, and even today there still exists a small percentage of the population that adheres to these early ideologies. Their continued existence is thanks in large part to the relative autonomy rural villages enjoyed from pre-history up until French dominion in the 19th and 20th centuries, despite long and alternating periods of outside control by China for much of the previous two millennia.³⁶ The Chinese originally conquered the northern

³⁶ SarDesai, *Vietnam*, 45.

portion of the Indochinese peninsula in the 2nd century BCE, but it was after a successful, albeit short-lived, rebellion in the 1st century CE that the Chinese warlords imposed a strict process of assimilation upon the Vietnamese, enforcing, among other cultural norms, Confucian ethics of “submission of subject to emperor, son to father, and wife to husband.”³⁷ It was also through the continued Chinese presence that Buddhism came to be the dominant religion in Vietnam, and from these two dominant ideologies the Vietnamese philosophical and religious worldview was derived. To quote acclaimed Vietnam War journalist Frances Fitzgerald, “The Vietnamese are Confucians in peacetime, Buddhists in times of trouble.”³⁸

It was not until the early 16th century that Portuguese and Dutch missionaries first spread Roman Catholicism to Vietnam, though the eventual spread of Christianity was brought about mostly by the later French presence, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries during colonial rule. In an attempt to facilitate evangelism, Alexandre de Rhodes, a French Jesuit who arrived in 1615, invented the *quoc-ngu*, a means of writing the Vietnamese language using roman characters rather than the indigenous logography.³⁹ Unbeknownst to de Rhodes, his contribution would later ease the transition for millions of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants who would one day travel westward, as they were already familiar with the western script. It was often the case that missionaries would aim to convert village leaders. Because of the communal nature of Vietnamese society, the conversion of the head of a village often meant the subsequent conversion of the entire

³⁷ Ibid, 14.

³⁸ Ibid, 82.

³⁹ Ibid, 33-4.

village whereby priests would perform mass baptismal ceremonies.⁴⁰ This was the experience of Fr. Simon Hoang, a refugee who today serves as priest at Sacred Heart church, which holds Vietnamese mass each Sunday. By the time of increased French colonial activity in Vietnam, missionaries claimed nearly one million converts, more than half of whom resided in the south.⁴¹

It was as a result of this Christian encroachment that the Vietnamese imperial government instituted progressively harsher punishments on missionaries and converts at the onset of the 18th century. Emperor Minh Mang in particular took offense to the Catholic recriminations toward ancestor worship, a practice he ascribed to dearly due to his Confucian background. As a result, in 1825 he issued an edict forbidding missionaries from entering the country, and several years later the practice of Catholicism became punishable by death.⁴² It was this persecution of Christians that gave the French government reason to increase its presence in Vietnam, and by 1862 the French held control over much of southern Vietnam and had full access to the Mekong River, a primary trade route.⁴³ Before French occupation, the single cultural thread of Confucian ethics tied together all of Vietnam. Once the French arrived and split the country into three regions (while exerting varying levels of influence in each) the nation began to splinter into distinct groups based largely on geography.⁴⁴ Cochinchina in the south, with Saigon as its capital, existed as a separate French colony, and as a result became the most westernized and economically vibrant as foreign money poured into its ports. Many of the elites in this region adopted

⁴⁰ Fr. Simon Hoang, in conversation with the author, June 15, 2016.

⁴¹ SarDesai, *Vietnam*, 34-5.

⁴² *Ibid*, 35.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 36-7.

⁴⁴ Elliott, *The Sacred Willow*, 77-8.

French practices and some even acquired French citizenship. Annam encompassed the highlands of the middle region and had a relatively sparse population and an economy largely dependent on agriculture and fishing. In the north bordering China was Tonkin, where Sino-Vietnamese trade routes, along with agriculture and mining, accounted for much of the economy, though industrialization during the French occupation led to a concentration of population in urban centers and the growth of a textile economy. In an effort to maintain control, the French employed a policy of “divide and rule” under which the Vietnamese could only travel between the districts with special permission, resulting in increased regional differences.⁴⁵ But even with these heightened artificial divisions, the single greatest cause for discord amongst Vietnamese was the increasing divide between Christians and Buddhists.

The decades following World War Two exacerbated that conflict. Japan had assumed control of the country during the war (though for the majority of the time it left the French administration in charge as a puppet government), and as a result, the Allies provided weapons and supplies to various nationalist groups, including Ho Chi Minh’s Viet Minh guerillas. Upon the conclusion of the war, the Viet Minh adopted a number of referendums to establish a government and signal a new era of independence for Vietnam, a plan the Allied nations, and in particular France, did not support, despite the post-war rhetoric of ending imperialism in the new age. At this point the Viet Minh were technically still a nationalist organization, though the majority of the leadership was already pro-communist sympathizers.⁴⁶ Once again Vietnam could not avoid conflict on its shores. The small but determined Viet Minh, with its power base in the mountains of the north, and the

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ SarDesai, *Vietnam*, 59.

French, based in Saigon in the south, fought for nearly a decade before signing the Geneva Settlement in 1954 which, along with bringing a brief respite in the fighting, divided the country along the 17th parallel, further exacerbating the imposed regional differences for Vietnamese on either side of the split. In Memphis, as in the rest of the United States, most Vietnamese came from south of the 17th parallel. But geopolitical identities contribute less to the separation of communities than they do to other characteristics, like religious affiliation, that had a greater impact on the later self-segregation of communities.

The short-lived peace of the Geneva Settlement ended in the late-1950s, by which point the United States had replaced France as the primary western influence in Vietnam. The conflict in Vietnam was, to the U.S., a largely political one between western-style capitalism and the specter of communism. Vietnamese Catholics as a whole—with their ideological ties to the west and their fear of persecution at the hands of the North Vietnamese—were “fanatic anti-communists” and, thus, natural allies.⁴⁷ For this reason, the U.S. decided to keep Ngo Dinh Diem, whom the French has appointed premier in 1954, as head of state when they assumed the leading role in the conflict—despite his polarizing and unpopular leadership up to that point. Diem hailed from an elite family that had converted to Catholicism in the 17th century, and his numerous western connections included spending two years at a Catholic seminary in the United States.⁴⁸ To the United States, Diem was an appealing puppet for the South Vietnamese government.

⁴⁷ Elliott, *The Sacred Willow*, 199.

⁴⁸ SarDesai, *Vietnam*, 69.

At the time of his appointment, however, Catholics made up only 10 percent of the population, and the selection of a Catholic premier angered many southern Buddhists, who saw him as another symbol of foreign interference. By this point western influence was inseparable from Vietnam, particularly in urban areas. Diem’s western connections and education were therefore neither uncommon amongst the elite nor a problem in their own right—as evidenced by Ho Chi Minh, who received his education in the west, too. But Diem returned to Vietnam far more openly westernized than Minh, and his Irish linen suits served as a symbol of his indoctrination, while Ho Chi Minh dressed in fatigues and sandals and came to be known for his

humble, ascetic lifestyle (Figure 4).⁴⁹ To make matters worse, Diem made little effort to appeal to the Buddhist majority. Many traditional Vietnamese actually held communism in distaste, the adherents of which they



Figure 4: A comparison of Ngo Dinh Diem (left) and Ho Chi Minh (right).

regarded as *vo gia dunh, vo to quoc*, or “people without a family and without a nation.”⁵⁰ In other words, they prioritized loyalty to international communism before loyalty to family and community—a cherished Confucian principle. This was exemplified when,

⁴⁹ Ibid, 73. Photo of Ngo Dinh Diem taken for official purposes by Department of the Air Force, and is available in the public domain through the National Archives and Records Administration; accessed via Wikipedia. Photo of Ho Chi Minh accessed via the National Names Database.

⁵⁰ Elliott, *The Sacred Willow*, 278.

contemporaneously with Diem's rise, the North Vietnamese government instituted forced labor camps and initiated mass persecutions of Christians in the name of collectivism and communism, prompting nearly one million refugees to flee southward. At this point, Diem could have attempted to form a broad base of support built on the widespread opposition to northern oppression and with the expressed aim to reunify Vietnam. Instead, he continued to antagonize the majority of the population, driving a rift amongst his constituents.

The refugees who fled southward were predominantly Catholic, and their arrival brought the Christian total in South Vietnam to around 2.2 million (still well in the minority).⁵¹ At the time, Diem garnered international notice—especially within the United States—for his efforts to rehabilitate and resettle those refugees, but domestically his methods proved controversial.⁵² Many southern Buddhists, for example, alleged his land redistribution program discriminated against Buddhist farmers by disproportionately confiscating their land to be reallocated to Catholic refugees. The program divided the populace along religious grounds, foreshadowing a pattern that would ultimately bring about the failure of his administration. In 1956, he appointed Catholic officials to oversee the administration of rural, predominantly Buddhist, villages, replacing the local leaders and effectively ending 2,000 years of village sovereignty, a move that further alienated the peasant population.⁵³ Likewise, his appointment of many Catholics to administrative positions frustrated southern Buddhists, who still made up the vast majority of the population. Three appointees in particular stood out: Diem's younger brother and his wife,

⁵¹ SarDesai, *Vietnam*, 70. And: *Ibid*, 82.

⁵² *Ibid*, 70-6.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 77.

Ngo Dinh Nhu and Madame Nhu—both puritanical Catholics—became his closest advisors, while his older brother, Ngo Dinh Thuc, became the highest Catholic official in Vietnam; Diem’s penchant for nepotism did not go unnoticed, and once again he appeared in direct contrast to Ho Chi Minh, who referred to the nation as his family.⁵⁴ Much of Diem’s legislation fell under the pretext of curbing the influence of communism, but in practice did more to curb individual liberties and augment Diem’s executive power, and in 1955 journalist Graham Greene denounced the Diem administration for “[slipping] into an inefficient dictatorship” instead of “confronting the totalitarian north with evidences of freedom.”⁵⁵ And while it is true many of the policies oppressed the entire populace regardless of religion, others unevenly affected Buddhists. For this reason, as Greene would go on to note, the government increasingly came to be identified with its Catholic leadership.⁵⁶ Religion had become a political position as much as a moral one.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid, 73.

⁵⁵ Graham Greene, “Last Act in Indo-China,” *New Republic* 132, May 9, 1955, p. 10.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Despite the increasingly politicized nature of religion, it is worth remembering that, throughout the era—and perhaps more than ever—the two religions continued to compete for the souls of the Vietnamese. Duong Van Mai Elliott, for instance, was born into a middle-class Buddhist family but later converted to Catholicism after she found herself attracted to the “redemption and eternal bliss” of the Bible. During her adolescence filled with uncertainty, bloodshed, and terror, this more hopeful outlook appealed to her in contrast to what felt like overly passive Buddhist offerings of “escape.” (Elliott, *The Sacred Willow*, 268.)



Figure 5: The self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc marked a turning point in American perceptions of the war in Vietnam. Photographer Malcolm Browne won a Pulitzer Prize for this photograph.

As a result, Diem's rise served to bolster support for the northern cause, which appeared far more accepting

of traditional Vietnamese values than Diem's administration.⁵⁸ Tensions between the Buddhist majority and the Catholic minority continued to escalate as dissatisfied southern Buddhists increased the pressure on Ngo Dinh Diem and staged protests and demonstrations in the streets of Saigon. In 1963, Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Thuc, denied Buddhists the right to hold a ceremony in the city of Hué only a week after Catholics held a similar celebration at the same location. (Hué, incidentally, is the city from which Fr. Simon Hoang, the Vietnamese priest at Sacred Heart Catholic church in Memphis, originates.⁵⁹) The Buddhists had already congregated around the temple in preparation, and the Catholic administration of the city called on the military to help disperse the crowd. The ensuing confrontation resulted in the death of nine Buddhists with many others injured; Diem blamed the Viet Cong for the incident. In response Buddhist monks initiated a series of

⁵⁸ SarDesai, *Vietnam*, 71.

⁵⁹ Fr. Simon Hoang, in conversation with the author, June 15, 2016.

protests, the first and most prominent of which was the iconic self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc, a highly revered Buddhist leader (Figure 5).⁶⁰

This latest series of incidents incited many traditional Vietnamese who had remained passive despite their frustrations to join the opposition movement, and soon a new swell of anti-Diem agitators rallied around the monks.⁶¹ This was a significant development, as Buddhism, unlike Catholicism, was not a structured religion with a clear hierarchy. Many Buddhists prayed at altars in their own homes and only came together at communal temples for holidays. Now the monks took on new leadership roles, and their political platform allowed them to coalesce disjointed opposition groups, particularly students, into a unified front against the government.⁶² Diem's administration responded by declaring martial law while ransacking temples and arresting Buddhist leaders throughout the south. Armed and angry protesters of both creeds clashed in the streets inducing fears of an open religious war and prompting some wealthy Vietnamese to flee the country.⁶³

The religious divide in the Vietnamese community of Memphis was in no way as tense as during the decades leading up to resettlement. The exceedingly contentious history between the two groups, however, is worth noting not only for its inevitable affect on inter-Vietnamese relations in Memphis, but also for how it played out against a backdrop of growing anti-U.S. sentiment that affected subsequent relations between immigrants and their American hosts accordingly. When Diem cracked down on Buddhist opposition, he did so using forces trained and equipped by the United States. But the

⁶⁰ Ibid, 83-6. Photo Credit: Malcolm Browne, "The Burning Monk," *Associated Press* 1963.

⁶¹ Elliott, *The Sacred Willow*, 296-7.

⁶² Ibid, 297.

⁶³ Ibid, 303-11.

spiraling situation in Vietnam—as well as the international media coverage of the Buddhist immolations—caused the United States to reconsider its position in support of Diem. President Kennedy instructed U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. to persuade Diem to distance himself from his brother and his brother’s wife, Madame Nhu, in an attempt to salvage the situation and appease opposition groups.⁶⁴ Diem refused, and in November of 1963 the United States supported anti-Diem generals in a successful coup d’état that resulted in Diem’s execution. When President Kennedy was assassinated later that same month, some bitter Vietnamese Catholics interpreted his death as Diem exacting revenge from beyond the grave—a sentiment that indicated the Catholic attitude towards perceived American betrayal.⁶⁵ The United States had managed to alienate Buddhists and Catholics alike through its indecisive handling of the feud.

The political landscape following the coup remained unstable, and the numerous subsequent regime changes were fraught with divisive religious implications. President Nguyen Van Thieu and Vice-President Nguyen Cao Ky eventually consolidated power from 1971 until collapse in 1975 as a Catholic/Buddhist tandem, respectively, but despotic rule and internal conflicts between the two negated any hope for effective leadership. One historian, reflecting on the American failure to establish support amongst the Vietnamese, attributed the debacle to an “incorrect diagnosis of the reasons for the insurrection.” What unified resistance against any American-backed effort “was not as much pro-Communist” as it was opposition to leaders like Diem, Thieu, and Ky, “all of whom failed to initiate and implement... much-needed political and socio-economic reforms.”⁶⁶ Ignoring profoundly

⁶⁴ SarDesai, *Vietnam*, 89-90.

⁶⁵ Elliott, *The Sacred Willow*, 299.

⁶⁶ SarDesai, *Vietnam*, 120.

contending elements within Vietnamese society, the United States instead continued to weigh every threat against the possibility of communist expansion, while South Vietnamese leaders focused on internal power struggles. Accordingly, these issues came to dominate the conflict in Vietnam—particularly in the South—while fundamental inequities went unaddressed. Local obstacles to a unified vision of Vietnam were subordinate to global ideologies, and each misguided solution produced a new and equally unsatisfactory result, different in detail but fundamentally identical. By 1973 the United States had withdrawn most of its presence from the Indochinese peninsula, leaving an economic and military dearth from which the South Vietnamese could not recuperate. Former South Vietnamese secretary of state Bùi Diễm voiced the opinion of many of his compatriots when he described this final abandonment as “unworthy of a great power.”⁶⁷ Ironically, Buddhists and Catholics, torn apart by years of conflict and animosity, could find some common ground in their mutual American misadventure.

In the final moments before the collapse of Saigon, the United States made desperate attempts to evacuate at-risk individuals from the south. Because of the disproportionate number of Catholics in administrative positions, there was a similar imbalance in the religious affiliations of many of those evacuated. Ultimately, of the millions of refugees who fled Vietnam, somewhere between 30 and 40 percent of those who came to live in the United States were Catholic, despite only making up some 10 percent of the total population.⁶⁸ This disparity can be attributed in part to religious persecution in Vietnam under the communist regime. Additionally, some Buddhist refugees felt more comfortable

⁶⁷ Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation*, 58.

⁶⁸ “Introduction to Asian Religions,” in *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed and Stephen Prothero (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13.

relocating to nearby countries where Buddhism remained the predominant faith, especially after enduring years of oppression under Catholic puppet-governments bowing to western influence (though as the extent of the refugee crisis became clear, more and more neighboring countries closed their borders, resulting in greater numbers of refugees arriving in the United States). Still, surveys in the late 1990s revealed between 60 and 80 percent of Vietnamese immigrants in the United States identified as Buddhist.⁶⁹ Memphis reflects those ratios still today, and although exact figures are hard to determine, one Catholic for every three or four Buddhists is a reasonable estimate—though the two creeds do not comprise the entirety of the population.⁷⁰

Prior to 1975, only 18,000 Vietnamese-Americans lived in the United States, many of whom were the spouses of businessmen or members of the armed services formerly stationed in Vietnam.⁷¹ As a result, most communities had no Vietnamese before the arrival of the first refugees. Just as some Vietnamese felt trepidations relocating to a country with which they associated the violence and destruction of the preceding decade, certain Americans held similar reservations about welcoming refugees from a country associated with the deaths of thousands of young soldiers and a stinging national defeat. In 1975, 54 percent of Americans polled opposed admitting Vietnamese refugees, primarily on account of economic concerns.⁷² Refugees came with few, if any resources, and would

⁶⁹ Ibid, 9.

⁷⁰ I derived this estimate from a comparison of congregation size estimates by Catholic and Buddhist religious leaders. Still, not all attendees of either practice are necessarily active adherents, nor are all adherents necessarily attending the Vietnamese iterations of their particular creed; several other Buddhist temples exist in Memphis founded by non-Vietnamese believers, while some Catholics attend English masses at churches besides Sacred Heart. (Fr. Simon; Huy; Dr. Suong.)

⁷¹ SarDesai, *Vietnam*, 217.

⁷² Ibid, 224.

initially be reliant on costly government assistance, as well as local charitable efforts to provide necessities like housing, food, clothing, and transportation, in addition to English language classes and assistance in acquiring basic documents like a driver's license. Then, once the new arrivals had settled in, they would compete with locals for jobs (although the first generation of refugees, for whom English language proficiency was rare, were often at least initially limited to low-paying blue-collar jobs). The *Commercial Appeal* reported similar concerns worried some Memphians, and one host mother admitted she had received complaints that refugees would take jobs "that might otherwise go to native Americans."⁷³ Another article quoted volunteers asking locals to put aside any "racial attitudes," decrying those unwilling to help the immigrants settle.⁷⁴ In addition to the many material and emotional challenges of relocating to America, refugees would also have to overcome their own biases and the biases of some locals, obstacles that affected Catholics and Buddhists alike.

The existence of familiar religious institutions, however, highlights one marked difference for Christian refugees versus Buddhist refugees. The contribution of religious organizations to the resettlement effort was a national trend, and Memphis was no different. A *Commercial Appeal* article announced on May 27, 1975 the establishment of a committee composed of various local religious institutions "interested in aiding the resettlement of Vietnam refugees."⁷⁵ Rev. John Batson, Memphis diocese resettlement director for the U.S. Catholic Conference (or U.S.C.C.), chaired the committee, while United Way, the Interfaith Association, Jewish Community Service Center, Lutheran Social Services

⁷³ Don Winbush, "More Refugees Expected in Area," *The Commercial Appeal*, July 12, 1979.

⁷⁴ Henry Bailey, "Group Gives Hearts, Home To Vietnamese Mother, Son," *The Commercial Appeal*, May 8, 1975.

⁷⁵ Clark Proteous, "Memphis Seeks Viet Refugees," *The Commercial Appeal*, May 27, 1975.

Center, and United Methodist Church all sent representatives. As a result, Christian refugees often came to their new home under the auspices of a familiar spiritual institution, and the organizations could immediately redirect them to services catering to their faith. Ms. Le, a Vietnamese resident, recalls resettling to Memphis through the U.S.C.C. shortly after the communist government released her husband from a concentration camp.⁷⁶ Despite the many challenges she and her husband and two children would face, “the first thing we worried about was the spiritual life,” she told me. Volunteers from the Catholic Charities met them at the airport and drove them to temporary government housing on Merriweather Avenue, a ten-minute walk from Catholic Charities headquarters. Despite feeling “worried, very afraid, and frustrated” with her new surroundings, she also felt overwhelmingly welcomed, and before long her family joined the growing community of Vietnamese Catholics at Sacred Heart. Her children sang in the choir every Sunday and she began volunteering to help the parish in whatever ways she could, and soon Ms. Le and her family felt fully embraced by a community that offered a social life, as well as spiritual and material support. Despite having moved out of Midtown in 2000, the entire family still returns to Sacred Heart every Sunday. Catholic Vietnamese refugees faced massive adjustments in their move to a new country and life, but they also had the good fortune to resettle in an area with long-established religious institutions similar (though not identical) to their own, easing at least one aspect of their transitions.

Naturally, Christian charities aided refugees of all creeds, though their efforts often went hand-in-hand with aspirations of evangelization. Berclair Baptist Church, for example, shuttled Vietnamese refugees to their church where they could take advantage of

⁷⁶ Ms. Le in conversation with the author, November 20, 2015.

the pool, recreational, and educational facilities; but they were also expected to attend the sermons, a foreign experience that sometimes tested the refugees' patience.⁷⁷ (Those early efforts led to the foundation of the Vietnamese Baptist Church in 1984, which, by the mid-2000s, had a congregation of roughly 250 Vietnamese.⁷⁸) Buddhists found themselves surrounded by implicit or explicit appeals from competing faiths immediately after arriving. Moreover, Buddhism occupied only a small niche in the American religious landscape, and much of that came courtesy of the spike in interest among counterculture movements like the Beat Generation and the hippies of the 1960s and 1970s, rather than indigenous Buddhist communities from East Asia.⁷⁹ For the first Buddhist refugees arriving in Memphis, then, there existed no established religious community to join. And while Buddhism, in comparison to Catholicism, is an isolated religion where adherents often worship at altars in the privacy of their homes, there is still a need for a communal space to gather for festivals and holidays. The lack of any such space intensified the spiritual void already exacerbated by the great upheaval and uncertainty that defined the first years of resettlement. Unsurprisingly, a number of refugees collaborated to purchase and convert a two-story home into the first Vietnamese Buddhist pagoda in the city shortly after coming to the city—part of an emerging pattern of “home temples” popping up in Vietnamese communities around the country.⁸⁰ Like most other Vietnamese spaces from this period, the temple is located at the heart of the Midtown neighborhood on the

⁷⁷ Doan Dinh, in conversation with the author, June 27, 2016.

⁷⁸ Memphis Vietnamese Baptist Church, “Our History.”

⁷⁹ Sandy Boucher, “Women, Buddhism, and Vipassana Meditation” (1991), in *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed and Stephen Prothero (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 274-277.

⁸⁰ “A Vietnamese Home Temple Zoning Dispute” (1996), in *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed and Stephen Prothero (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 388-91.

intersection of Jefferson Street and Cleveland Avenue, just across from Catholic Charities headquarters. It still exists today as a place of Buddhist worship, though congregants eventually established two other temples around the outskirts of the city to accommodate the growing population.

But establishing a Buddhist community in Memphis was not as simple as merely opening a temple. Buddhism has deep cultural roots in Vietnam, and many of the core tenets came to define their secular traditions as much as they did the religious ones. Buddhist leaders like Dr. Thich Thien An, the first teacher of Vietnamese Buddhism in America, sought a balance between preserving traditions and adapting the faith to a new culture. In a 1980 speech, Thich Thien An urged Buddhist teachers to “pass on the essence of Buddhism in a way appropriate to the new culture,” while “[stripping] away from it the attached cultural ideas and practices from their own land which are inappropriate for the new society.” Through *upaya*, or “skillful means,” he believed Buddhist immigrants could acculturate their form of “Asian Buddhism” to become an “American Buddhism” that would develop more naturally in its new setting while attracting new adherents.⁸¹ The Dalai Lama made a similar appeal during a 1989 visit to the United States, when a concerned Vietnamese transplant asked how refugees might “become Americanized, yet hold to the core of Buddhism.” In response, the Dalai Lama urged the Buddhist community to “make a distinction between the true aspect of Buddhist teaching” and those conventions seen as

⁸¹ Thich Thien An, “The Buddha’s Birthday in a Vietnamese-American Temple” (1986), in *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed and Stephen Prothero (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 315-19.



Figure 6: Quan Am Monastery.

Buddhist due to “cultural essence.”⁸² For Vietnamese Buddhists in Memphis and across the United States, the challenge of rebuilding a faith community meant not only creating new physical spaces to gather and worship, but also defining what Buddhism meant at its core while determining how to best assimilate the religious mores into a new cultural backdrop.

Some of the adjustments are more logistical than spiritual. Dr. Hua Thi Thu Suong, a nun at Quan Am Monastery in Memphis (Figure 6), described the challenges of hosting events or festivals that fall during the workweek.⁸³ Now, to accommodate for work schedules and long travel distances due to the scattered Vietnamese community, all events are held on Saturdays or Sundays. (This concern is not unique to the Buddhists, however, and Fr. Simon Hoang, the Vietnamese priest at Sacred Heart parish, reported the same adjustment.⁸⁴) The local temples also commonly host events like chanting sessions, Dharma talks, retreats, and yoga and Tai Chi classes for English speakers in an effort to share Buddhist culture and Buddha’s teachings with others. These outreach programs

⁸² “The Dalai Lama Meets the Buddhist Sangha Council of Southern California” (1989), in *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed and Stephen Prothero (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 320-1.

⁸³ Hua Thi Thu Suong, in conversation with the author, June 17, 2016.

⁸⁴ Fr. Simon Hoang, June 15, 2016.

integrate indigenous Vietnamese practices into a local context, furthering the assimilation of the Vietnamese community as a whole with Memphis. By and large, however, Dr. Suong believes the actual religious ceremonies have been faithfully preserved from Vietnam to America. Another Vietnamese Buddhist in Memphis suspected his creed had already become “Americanized,” so to speak, insofar as it necessarily engaged with Japanese Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, Thai Buddhism, etc. As a result, he believed the faith had evolved to place a renewed focus on the universal aspects of Buddhism that aim to make adherents better people, like meditation and philosophy. But he did not predict any great shift away from the cultural roots from which it originated, suggesting the original tenets—though inevitably faded—would be all the more accepted in an American society “built upon the contributions of other cultures.”⁸⁵

The greatest differences between old and new world Buddhism come from an ideological tradition slightly removed from the original faith itself. Vietnamese life, whether for Buddhists or Catholics, is profoundly intertwined with a Confucian philosophy that teaches a strict social and political hierarchy governing interactions within the family, community, and nation. Vietnamese immigrants resettled in a society that does not expect the same subservience of wife to husband or have the same reverence for filial piety and ancestor veneration. But these are Confucian tenets, rather than Buddhist ones—despite the intimate connection between the two—and when religious leaders called for an awareness of where Buddhist teachings ended and cultural traditions began, it was this distinction to which they referred. They were concerned an overly dogmatic loyalty to customs that did not originate from Buddha’s teachings, but were nevertheless so closely

⁸⁵ Huy, in correspondence with the author, July 20, 2016.

associated after two millennia of interrelatedness, would threaten the survival and spread of Buddhism in America; adherents might cling to both sets of values as though they were one and the same. The concern had merit, and already the newfound American interest in Buddhism was attracting criticism by some members—especially feminist scholars and activists—who bucked against what they viewed as regressive, patriarchal tendencies in the male-dominated Asian iterations of the religion, tenets that did not corroborate with Buddha’s teachings, but had nevertheless come to define the reality of Buddhism.⁸⁶ In this principle lies another fundamental division in the Vietnamese community in Memphis between those who continued to ascribe to traditional Vietnamese principles, and those who adopted a more American mindset. More so than religious affiliation this division falls on a spectrum, although different groups align more regularly on one end or the other of the scale. Tracking the development of Vietnamese Catholicism and Buddhism in Memphis reveals some of those tendencies.

Sacred Heart Catholic Church once served an almost-exclusively white congregation, but the demographics began to shift in the 1970s.⁸⁷ Although many of the white families moved out of the neighborhood around this time during the epidemic of White Flight, most continued to return to Sacred Heart for some time. But as minority communities—of which the Vietnamese were only a small portion—took their place in Midtown, growing numbers of Latinos/as and Vietnamese joined the parish. It was at this point that many white families, frustrated with the immigrant communities’ linguistic and cultural differences as well as their scant financial resources, left, and the congregations of St. Therese’s and other

⁸⁶ Boucher, “Women, Buddhism, and Vipassana Meditation,” 274-277.

⁸⁷ Much of the subsequent information on the Catholic community comes from interviews with Fr. Simon Hoang, the priest at Sacred Heart.

nearby Catholic churches grew accordingly—a trend Fr. Simon attributes to the inevitable “reality of human behavior.” The Vietnamese population in Memphis climbed significantly in the 1990s, and the numbers at Sacred Heart reflected that. By the middle of the decade a Vietnamese priest was coming from out of town once a month to deliver Vietnamese mass, and in 2002 the church had its first permanent Vietnamese pastor. Today Sacred Heart holds three services every Sunday: an English mass for the small, elderly, white community of parishioners who appreciated the church’s new diversity and remained loyal, totaling some 30 attendees; a

Vietnamese mass, attracting around 500 attendees on average; and a Spanish mass, attracting the largest community at around 700 attendees. Most Vietnamese left the Midtown neighborhood in



Figure 7: Phuong Long, an authentic Vietnamese restaurant in Midtown.

the 1990s and early-2000s after securing enough financial stability to afford moving out of the city. During this period of “Yellow Flight,” the overall numbers of Vietnamese congregants continued to increase, though some early members of the church did seek new, more convenient parishes in the suburbs. Others endured commutes ranging from half-an-hour to an hour-and-a-half in order to return each week, either out of a loyalty to the church that initially accepted them, or due to the lack of Vietnamese alternatives in the region. Numbers regularly exceed 800 visitors on special occasions, from grandparents to

infants and everything in between. Because of the geographical spread of the community, most social events are held on Sundays as well, and families will make the trip to Midtown and spend a full day reunited in the neighborhood they once called home (Figure 7).

Vietnamese Catholics are, historically, more sympathetic to western attitudes. In light of this, it would make sense if Catholics skewed further towards American values and away from Confucian ones. But they are also a self-contained religious community, insofar as the Vietnamese mass is ethnically homogenous and there is little interaction with the other communities of the church, nor with other churches. Sacred Heart holds joint trilingual masses on Easter and Christmas, but many elders in the community dislike this change, preferring to stick to that which they know: “their tradition, their language, their culture.”⁸⁸ During interviews, current and former parishioners from Sacred Heart, without saying so explicitly, often give voice to values traditionally associated with Confucianism: building yourself and others up through the family unit, respecting elders, and promoting a harmonious world through service.⁸⁹ The connection with Catholicism intrinsically links this sub-community to a western tradition, but the success with which they have crafted a comprehensive community where none previously existed has allowed those who wish to live a Vietnamese lifestyle in America the ability to do so in some fundamental aspects. Moreover, unlike Buddhist immigrants, Catholics resettled in a society already familiar with their religious practices, enabling them to continue observing their faith as they had before without needing to worry, as the early Buddhist leaders did, about evolving and adapting their practices to fit American culture. These two facts explain why the first generation of Vietnamese Catholics have by-and-large preserved the ethical foundation

⁸⁸ Jennifer Tat, in conversation with the author, July 10, 2016

⁸⁹ Doan Dinh, Fr. Simon Hoang, Ms. Le, Van Phan, Jennifer Tat, Tien Tran.

with which they arrived, despite being the more westernized of the two primary religions, and therefore the subgroup seemingly more likely to assimilate.

Did Buddhist refugees in Memphis handle the transition differently, in light of the appeals of early Buddhist leaders in the country?⁹⁰ At least in the early going, no. The converted temple across from Catholic Charities sufficed as the only dedicated Vietnamese Buddhist space in Memphis for over two decades, and religious gatherings like Lunar New Year were held at larger, non-Buddhist sites. In 2002, as more and more Vietnamese left Midtown for the suburbs, the Venerable Thich Nguyen Tanh founded Quan Am Monastery in southeast Memphis, not far from the airport. Shortly after, Pho Da Buddhist Temple opened, also outside Memphis city-proper (and only a couple minutes drive from Vietnamese Baptist Church). These bigger complexes expanded the means of the Buddhist community in Memphis, and their mission included sharing religious teachings with other locals in ways the original temple did not have the capacity to do. Arriving Catholics had a head start on Buddhists because their religious traditions existed in the area well before they did, but by now the two groups are on equal footing and enjoy similar levels of success. Counterintuitively, because Buddhism is a niche religion in the area, Vietnamese Buddhists engage more with the outside community than Vietnamese Catholics due to their efforts to attract new followers with English services and events. The same factors that allowed Catholics to establish their sub-community quickly also limits their engagement, as there is little onus to evangelize outside of the Vietnamese community when so many other area churches—all under the Catholic Diocese of Memphis—cater to English-speaking

⁹⁰ Much of the subsequent information on the Buddhist community comes from an interview with Dr. Hua Thi Thu Suong, a nun at Quan Am, and email correspondence with Mr. Huy.

constituents. The temples are far more autonomous and sparse, and their effort to attract new members is both a religious duty and a means of survival. Any deep-seated fears of losing old traditions to western influences are lessened by the need to promote Buddhism to a local culture foreign to its tenets.

With that said, the outreach programs pass on Buddhist lessons specific to Vietnamese and, by extension, Confucian tradition, and potential converts are both aware of this, and expecting it. Moreover, English and Vietnamese services are held separately, and though the two

communities overlap for some festive occasions, they are largely independent. And while the Buddhist Vietnamese in Memphis are, naturally, involved in many different



Figure 8: A group of Vietnamese Vietnam War veterans being honored.

activities besides faith-based commitments that bring them into contact with others outside their community (e.g. work, school, social organizations, etc.), the temples themselves seem to lend themselves to relative anonymity. This description applies best to the Quan Am Monastery, founded with the mission to “meet the religious needs of the Vietnamese Buddhist community here in Memphis.”⁹¹ High, white walls surround the complex, located in the southeast outskirts of town, and to enter you must pass through

⁹¹ Mr. Huy, in correspondence with the author, June 28, 2016.

large wrought iron gates. Inside there are three interconnected buildings that make up the place of worship, a more communal activity space, and the living quarters for the fifteen-to-twenty resident monks and nuns. Surrounding this is an extensive property, part of which is occupied with a series of greenhouses that grow all manner of fruits and vegetables—cucumbers, pumpkins, chilies, tomatoes, salad greens, and more—used to both feed the residents of the monastery, and to sell and sustain the temple financially. Much of the rest of the grounds are covered in gardens, walking paths, and ponds. I spoke with Dr. Hua Thi Thu Suông, a nun who had only relocated to Memphis last August after studying in India for eight years to earn her Ph.D. Her English was halting, and many of the interview questions were lost in translation, or she was not able to answer because of her newness to the area. These anecdotes reflect an image of relative reclusiveness: a walled in, nearly self-sustaining monastery that houses a community of monks and nuns with mostly limited English skills. Despite some engagement with a wider community, then, first-generation Vietnamese Buddhists, like Catholics, have been able to preserve traditional ideals since resettling, thanks to a community sufficiently entrenched to allow relative independence, and the continued arrival of Buddhist adherents from abroad.

Catholics and Buddhists are in many ways more united in Memphis than they had been in Vietnam, a surprising reality considering the history of conflict and intense animosity that defined their interactions in the last two-and-a-half centuries. The sub-communities come together to celebrate Vietnamese holidays and memorials at one or another religious gathering institution, and both groups make various free services—Vietnamese and English language classes, traditional dance lessons, youth summer camps, etc.—available to anyone in the community. One example of this is the Vietnamese



Figure 9: Reception prepared and served by women and families (top).



Figure 10: Fr. Simon sings onstage accompanied by a local Vietnamese band (middle).



Figure 11: Vietnamese veteran shares old photographs with a local Memphis representative from William-Sonoma (bottom left).

Figure 12: Veterans and their friends and family enjoy a meal together (bottom right).

Vietnam War veterans society—a group that dates back to at least 1993—which held the 2016 iteration of its annual commemoration at Sacred Heart church, though the list of attendees included honored guests of various creeds (Figures 8 and 9 - 12).⁹² Van Phan, who arrived to Memphis in 1990 under the direction of the first formal immigration plan between the United States and Vietnam, came from a Buddhist family.⁹³ She met her husband, a Catholic, when they lived in the same apartment building in Midtown (an anecdote indicative in its own right of the unifying influence of the early physical community), and in order to get married she converted to Catholicism. In Vietnam, she admitted, that sort of intermixing was very rare, and her conversion would have tainted her entire family's reputation; she experienced no such retribution in Memphis. The parents of Jennifer Tat, a second generation Vietnamese-American, also represent the union of a Buddhist and a Catholic, as does Tien Tran, who was raised by his Buddhist mother but converted to Catholicism before marrying his wife in Memphis. Ms. Phan attributed this shift to the fact that the two groups do not represent an existential threat to each other in the United States, and they are instead united by the hardships of their past and present lives. The religious conflict in Vietnam came to symbolize a struggle for power, defining a sociopolitical debate between nationalism and foreign intervention, east and west, north and south. Catholics dominated the government of South Vietnam while the communists held the Buddhists in higher regard for nationalistic reasons, but after the war ended Buddhists came to learn the communist government was not tolerant of their creed, either.⁹⁴ For both groups, resettling in the United States meant an end to religious

⁹² "Veterans recall 'terrible, terrible' past," *The Commercial Appeal*, August 13, 1993.

⁹³ Van Phan, in conversation with the author, July 16, 2016.

⁹⁴ Fr. Simon Hoang, in conversation with the author, June 15, 2016.

persecution. Old disputes ceased to define everyday reality, superseded instead by the basic concerns of beginning life anew. Rather than using resettlement as an excuse to accelerate the division of the two groups long portended by their contentious history, the entire community has instead found commonalities that unite them in solidarity.

In other ways the two communities are not totally coalesced. While interviewing Jennifer Tat, she made the offhand remark that it seemed to her everyone in the community knew everyone else.⁹⁵ But it was apparent from context she was referring only to those within the Catholic sub-community, and later she admitted to interacting with Buddhists only occasionally, at stores and restaurants, or at joint events like festivals and concerts. Her initial use of “everybody” in conjunction with the subsequent clarification indicates at least some level of distance between the two groups. Similarly, Bao, a young man from Sacred Heart, suggested that if I wanted to see “real Vietnamese culture,” I should visit Quan Am Monastery.⁹⁶ He referred specifically to how everyone there speaks Vietnamese, and how the entire community assembles there for holidays. This is an interesting charge, and it raises the question of Vietnamese identity. What is “Vietnamese” in America? Despite his Catholic heritage, Bao considered the Buddhist tradition more true to the Vietnamese character, and Catholicism to its western origins. It is true, of course, that Vietnam and Buddhism have a much longer shared history. But given the massive changes in lifestyle for all Vietnamese immigrants in America, as well as the appeals by Buddhist leaders to adapt religious practices to a local context, the notion that there is any steady Vietnamese identity seems inconsistent. Bao is in his early-20s, and although he spent the first eight years of his life in Vietnam, it is reasonable to wonder if his conception of

⁹⁵ Jennifer Tat, in conversation with the author, July 10, 2016.

⁹⁶ Bao, in conversation with the author, July 12, 2016.

Vietnamese identity is at least in part derived from a nostalgic conception of his cultural history. Finally, the geographic dispersion of the community insures the two groups come into contact less often now than at any previous point, either in Midtown or back in Vietnam—a circumstance that may enhance differences as the community continues to evolve.

The greatest divide in the Vietnamese population of Memphis, however, is that which exists between the generations. It is worth acknowledging that every community in the world can be divided along lines similar to the ones defined in this paper. In that respect, the Vietnamese are more alike than different; indeed, they would be truly unique if there were not these various artificial and real differences between members of the same community. With that in mind, however, the generational divide is one that affects the Vietnamese in ways far more drastic than for generations of non-refugees/immigrants who by-and-large can rely on shared cultural characteristics to unify their life experiences. This is to be expected, as Vietnamese-Americans who grew up in the United States are subjected to a cultural context much different from their parents. Attending schools with non-Vietnamese students acculturates the second- and third-generations far more than those Vietnamese who arrived after reaching maturity. Within the later generations there is a range of comfort with Vietnamese culture, too, although other differences that are more apparent in the first-generation get smoothed out with each successive generation. Residents born in Vietnam feel pressure to assimilate and be accepted locally, while at the same time wanting to preserve “who they are and where they come from”; their children feel pressure, meanwhile, to balance the expectations of their parents with the different

realities of coming of age in Memphis.⁹⁷ Interviews with first- and second-generation Vietnamese reveal in what ways the two groups are diverging, as well as which characteristics continue to pervade their identities and cultural values.

The first arrivals, who grew up in Vietnam and generally identify as Vietnamese, have a far different identity than the subsequent generation(s) who were either born in Vietnam but left during or before their formative years, or, more drastically, those children who were born in the United States. Of the younger generations interviewed for this research, it very quickly comes out that there is an issue of identity. Language, for example, comes up often in these discussions, and second-generation youth routinely understand Vietnamese better than they speak it. (In contrast, many first-generation arrivals had some experience writing and reading English—either from their education in Vietnam or from classes in refugee camps—but many found American dialects, especially in the South, difficult to discern.⁹⁸) As a result, while most families predominantly speak Vietnamese at home, many children converse with a version of Vietnamese interspersed with English (or “Vietlish,” as one interviewee called it).⁹⁹ Other times, when parents are attempting to improve their English by speaking it at home, their children learn little or no Vietnamese.¹⁰⁰ Occasionally, when abilities are particularly mismatched, parents speak in Vietnamese while their children respond in English. The parents who insist on Vietnamese usually do so for two purposes. Firstly, it is an intentional effort to pass on Vietnamese to their children and preserve the language for future generations. The second reason is more practical: the parents are not comfortable enough with English to do otherwise. It is

⁹⁷ Hunter, *Vietnamese in Memphis*, 14.

⁹⁸ Tien Tran, in conversation with the author, June 30, 2016.

⁹⁹ Andy Nguyen, in conversation with the author, June 28, 2016.

¹⁰⁰ Fr. Simon Hoang, in conversation with the author, June 15, 2016.

common for first-generation immigrants to develop a vocabulary and linguistic acumen sufficient enough to get by professionally, but not to converse on more nuanced topics, like politics.¹⁰¹ As a result, there may be significant differences in English proficiency between a service worker communicating with clients, an administrator directing employees, and a technician operating in relative isolation.

Various community-wide efforts attempt to preserve the language through the next generation. Sacred Heart and the two larger temples provide Vietnamese classes on weekends and in the summer. Miss Mary's Child Care Center gained some notoriety amongst the community in the 1990s after the proprietor hired several Vietnamese adults, and soon the daycare served a predominantly Vietnamese clientele, allowing the children to interact with other Vietnamese while improving their English and Vietnamese proficiency, as well as develop a greater cultural competency.¹⁰² Parents who had to work long hours found solace in the fact that these opportunities afforded their children the chance to continue learning about their heritage when away from home.¹⁰³

Still, the overall decline in language skills is evident. Several interviewees admitted their Vietnamese facility peaked when they were young before they began school, but as they grew up they spent more time conversing in English and less time at home speaking Vietnamese. Bao, who came to the United States at eight-years-old (and is thus a member of the "1.5 generation," a designation for immigrants who left their native country before adolescence), says that while he has a higher level of Vietnamese competency than most college-age peers due to the years he spent in Vietnam, he finds himself forgetting words

¹⁰¹ Doan Dinh, in conversation with the author, June 27, 2016.

¹⁰² Wayne Risher, "Center gets Asian kids off to a good start in life," *The Commercial Appeal*, October 10, 1998.

¹⁰³ Ms. Le, in conversation with the author, November 20, 2015.

and phrases more and more frequently—a change that disappoints him.¹⁰⁴ When asked how much Vietnamese her children knew, Van Phan said her eldest child, Mary, knew the most, while each of the subsequent three children knew progressively less. At that moment, her 11-year-old son Sam ran by with a slew of shrieking cousins and friends celebrating a relative’s seventh birthday party. Ms. Phan called him over and asked if he knew Vietnamese, but he only smiled shyly, not responding in my presence. Ms. Phan then asked if he could say “I love you” in Vietnamese. He did, and she hugged him as he raced off to rejoin the fray. “He doesn’t know much,” she said, with a smile, “but that’s enough!” She doubts her children will pass on much Vietnamese to their kids.¹⁰⁵

Unsurprisingly, all of the second-generation subjects interviewed speak English with their Vietnamese peers and consider English to be their primary and preferred language. In recognition of this trend, Fr. Simon tried introducing some English to Sacred Heart’s Vietnamese mass so the younger parishioners would not miss out on the message in the sermon, but this frustrated parents and grandparents who wanted a traditional service.¹⁰⁶ The *Thieu Nhi Thanh The* (or “Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Society”), is partially designed to help young Catholics learn Vietnamese with games, Bible readings, and discussions, but Jennifer Tat conceded activities are more likely to be conducted in English when a younger leader directs the activities.¹⁰⁷ I witnessed a range of perspectives among the second generation on preserving Vietnamese. Some take pride in knowing the language of their heritage and only regret not having a firmer grasp of it, while others appear more or less indifferent to the emphasis their parents place on carrying on the

¹⁰⁴ Bao, in conversation with the author, July 12, 2016.

¹⁰⁵ Van Phan, in conversation with the author, July 16, 2016.

¹⁰⁶ Fr. Simon Hoang, in conversation with the author, June 15, 2016.

¹⁰⁷ Jennifer Tat, in conversation with the author, July 10, 2016.

language. Asked whether they hope to continue the tradition and teach the language to *their* children, the responses varied from a tentative “yes,” to a resigned “no, probably not.”

Linguistic shifts are an easily observable facet of cultural change between generations, but *what* is communicated, rather than *how*, informs more about the evolution of the Vietnamese in Memphis. First-generation immigrants tend to cling to the values with which they were instilled in their youth, but arrival in America upset many of those expectations. Males raised in traditional Vietnamese communities came to the United States with Confucian patriarchal values in mind, expecting to continue as the sole breadwinner and undisputed head of the family.¹⁰⁸ Instead, even highly trained and educated refugees found themselves taking low-paying, blue-collar jobs, meaning a single income could not adequately support an entire family.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, the Vietnamese immersed themselves in their work, striving to leave their children in a better position than that which they found themselves by saving money and providing a high-quality education.¹¹⁰ As a result they came to be known as extremely hard workers, both within the community and out, and their commitment to working long hours helped ensure eventual success for many immigrant. The resentment some refugees felt for America following the Vietnam War dissipated as they came to realize opportunities in the United States afforded them the potential to forge a better life here than they had at home. Tien Tran came to realize this as he worked his way up the employment chain. Today, he owns a prosthetics company that proved so successful he was asked to serve as an advisor for the prosthetics industry to the Department of Labor; a certificate of appreciation for that work

¹⁰⁸ Elliott, *The Sacred Willow*, 466.

¹⁰⁹ SarDesai, *Vietnam*, 223.

¹¹⁰ Doan Dinh, in conversation with the author, November 18, 2015.

hangs proudly in his office. Tran believes now that, “this country [does not] care where you came from [or] what color you are... if you’re good, they’ll appreciate you.” Were he to do-over his life since coming to America, he would “without a doubt” choose to settle in Memphis again.¹¹¹

But the cultural obsession with work meant parents sacrificed time with their children, an important tradeoff when family support was not in place.¹¹² Traditionally, multiple generations of a single family cohabitated so that while parents worked, grandparents looked after the children, teaching them Vietnamese and instilling proper values.¹¹³ In resettling to America, however, families fragmented, so early communities of refugees replicated that system as best they could by banding together and looking after one another, although that became less tenable and less necessary as families moved away from Midtown.¹¹⁴ That lack of guidance contributed to the speed with which the second generation adopted native values—though the same process inevitably takes place in any immigrant community. Subsequently, children pursued jobs or educations away from family and disrupted the traditional support system even further, contributing to the decline of Vietnamese language and values amongst later generations, and stranding elders with little support in an unfamiliar country, sometimes prompting depression, homesickness, and a sense of helplessness.¹¹⁵

Second-generation immigrants who grew up surrounded by American social standards also found these new values at odds with their traditional parents, who tended

¹¹¹ Tien Tran, in conversation with the author, June 30, 2016.

¹¹² Wright State University’s Asian and Native American Center, “Between Two Worlds: The Vietnamese American Experience 1975 – 2016,” documentary, first aired June 13, 2016.

¹¹³ Jennifer Tat, in conversation with the author, July 10, 2016.

¹¹⁴ Elliott, *The Sacred Willow*, 465-466.

¹¹⁵ SarDesai, *Vietnam*, 223.

to hold more conservative positions on dating and marriage. In Vietnam, arranged marriages were common—though less so as the twentieth century wore on—and matches were made as diplomatic maneuvers between families rather than for love.¹¹⁶ In something of a holdover from that tradition, interracial marriages were still frowned upon by many refugees arriving in America, and some youth still today believe their parents prefer they marry a fellow Vietnamese, although no son or daughter interviewed for this paper has said he/she would *only* date or marry another ethnic Vietnamese. Some conservative parents are not simply worried about dating a non-Vietnamese, but about dating at all, and even something as innocent as a sleepover with friends can require explanation and interpretation for unaccustomed parents. One child of refugee parents admitted she and her siblings were occasionally embarrassed by their parents' old-world sensibilities, and even the pressure to hold a “tacky” traditional Vietnamese wedding could alienate the two generations.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Elliott, *The Sacred Willow*, 80.

¹¹⁷ Pauline Dinh in conversation with the author, June 15, 2016

The competing values often make more sense to later generations when they first have a chance to visit Vietnam, a process that became easier once the United States and Vietnam renewed diplomatic relations in the 1990s. Of the interviewees who

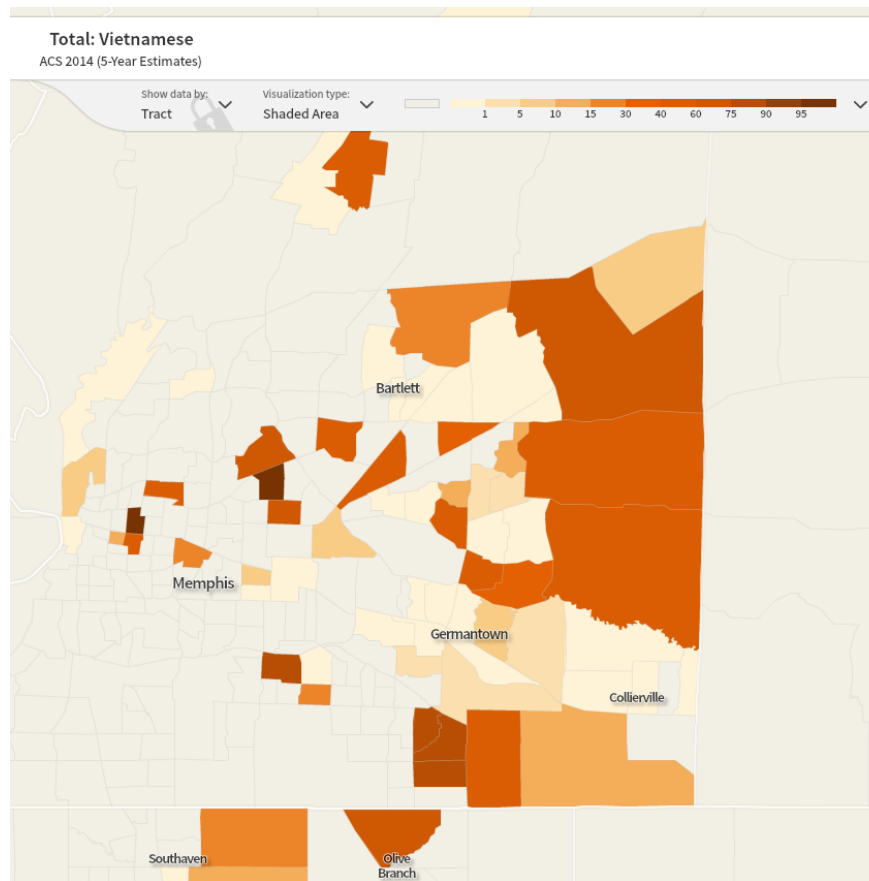


Figure 13: A map of the Memphis Metropolitan Area indicating Vietnamese population density in different regions of the city.

have had the opportunity to visit Vietnam, all refer to those experiences as some of the most profound of their lives, affording them a glimpse into their family heritage that seems now little more than a distant memory. The trips are typically made with the intent of returning to visit family. For that reason, Tien Tran, who only returned to Vietnam once, has no intention of going back again after his father—the last close relative still in Vietnam—passed away.¹¹⁸ Mr. Tran arrived in 1982, and by now he considers himself more American than Vietnamese, and thinks of Memphis as more of a home than Saigon. His wife, who still has family in Vietnam, has returned several additional times, each time with their three sons. The children, says Mr. Tran, enjoyed the experience. Here again is

¹¹⁸ Tien Tran, in conversation with the author, June 30, 2016.

another divide: the Vietnamese-Americans born in the United States refer to those trips as fundamentally influential to their worldviews, whereas parents look on them with some degree of sadness, a return to a country they no longer recognize to see family from whom they have grown apart during their new lives. To second-generation Vietnamese-Americans, Vietnam is a place of fascination, a kind of alternative reality that reveals *what could have been*. For first-generation refugees, the only reality is one of painful memories and a previous life.

Still, the question of identity between generations is one that scholars have explored via entire books, and the focus of this paper is how life in and perceptions of Memphis vary between these generations. The children are in many ways more connected with Memphians outside the Vietnamese community than their parents thanks to school and other social activities, and different experiences and exposures engender different social attitudes. Occasionally older Vietnamese interview subjects made remarks pushing the bounds of racial sensitivity while citing experiences from the early days of living in Memphis, when some immigrants were victims of theft or violence—a reality underscored by the brutal murder of an 18-year-old refugee in 1982.¹¹⁹ Vietnamese who chose to leave Midtown for the suburbs did so for a variety of reasons, from improved living accommodations, better school districts, and a quieter life outside the city, to an escape from areas associated with high crime and violence; in other words, the motivations for this “Yellow Flight” mirrored closely the rationales for White Flight decades earlier, and the same factors that created blocks of housing availability foreshadowed the subsequent

¹¹⁹ Jerome Wright, “Death Ends Long Trek To Be Free,” *The Commercial Appeal*, September 26, 1982.

departure (Figure 13).¹²⁰ Younger interviewees often grew up in the more homogenous environment of the suburbs, but they still came of age in the diverse Memphis landscape and are seemingly more at ease within the range of identities. At Sacred Heart, for example, intermixed social groups comprised of Vietnamese and Hispanic youths have emerged, a trend not reflected amongst the adults.¹²¹ Children of Vietnamese immigrants acknowledge

the pattern of intolerance amongst some of their parents with discomfort.

The generational shift comes at a



Figure 14: Inside Viet Hoa.

time when the Vietnamese landscape in Memphis is undergoing changes, as well. The erosion of the Midtown community is marked most significantly by the physical separation of families, but there are other byproducts of that trend. Just a block up N. Cleveland Street from Sacred Heart church and Chua Chanh Tam temple is Viet Hoa, a grocery store, which was for many years the best source for authentic Vietnamese ingredients (Figure 14).

Along with its regular patrons, the store served the many Vietnamese restaurants in the

¹²⁰ Vietnamese Population Density in Memphis, ACS 2014 (5-Year Estimates). Social Explorer, based on data from U.S. Census Bureau.

¹²¹ Pauline Dinh and Jennifer Tat, in conversation with the author, June 15, 2016, and July 10, 2016, respectively.

neighborhood, making it possible for their cuisine to remain as authentic as possible.¹²² But as the neighborhood became home to fewer and fewer Vietnamese, the store's business suffered accordingly, and in turn new Chinese management expanded the grocery selection in the last half-decade to include other East-Asian fare (Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Thai, etc.), as well as a Latino aisle, and more general staples like pasta and other processed foods (Figures 15 - 17).¹²³ The expansion took up the whole structure, thereby evicting the Vietnamese café and pho shops where Vietnamese formerly gathered. I visited the grocery with Bao, a young Vietnamese who still lives down the block and attends Sacred Heart while pursuing his education at University of Memphis. He had come to get ingredients for a traditional "street snack," and as we walked through the aisles he described the changes to the store and neighborhood he had observed in recent years. Three events in particular reinforced his description. Firstly, he was frustrated when he could not find the produce necessary for his recipe, something he assured me was a byproduct of the culinary shift in focus. Secondly, of the employees working that evening, only the woman at the cash register was Vietnamese, while several young Latinos stocked the shelves and another Latino worked behind the butcher's counter. Finally, the clientele, while primarily East Asian, was a minority Vietnamese.

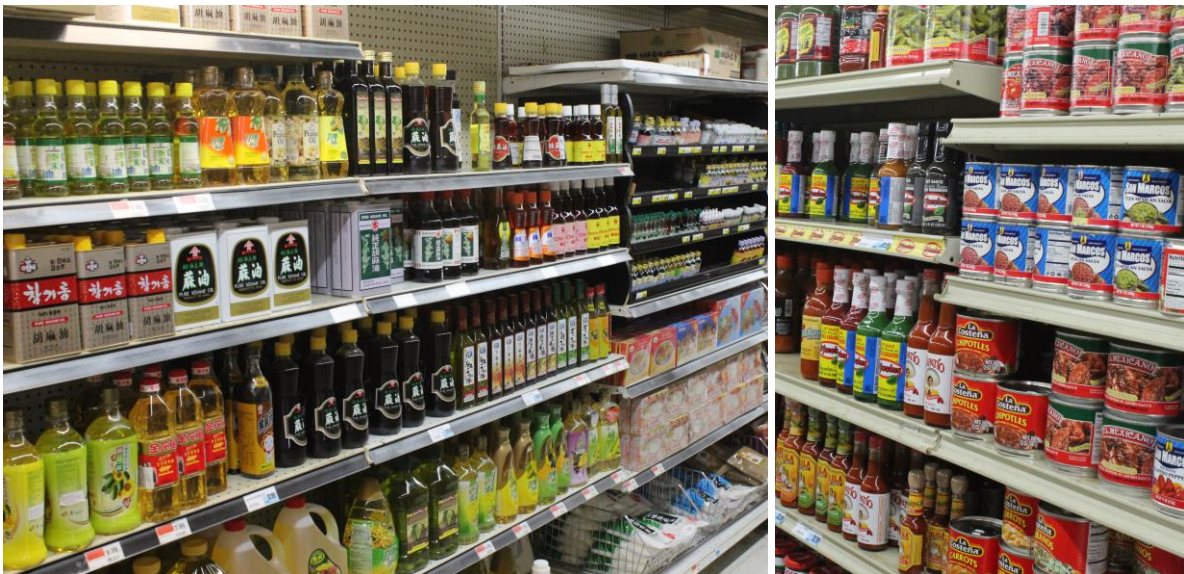
The co-owner and head chef at nearby Phuong Long, Toan Vo (Figure 18), explained that he still gets many of his ingredients from Viet Hoa, but he also has to rely more on Restaurant Depot, a wholesale grocer with a wide range of products.¹²⁴ Mr. Vo came from Vietnam just eight years ago after his first child was born, and he chose to settle in

¹²² Toan Vo, in conversation with the author, June 28, 2016.

¹²³ Bao, in conversation with the author, July 12, 2016.

¹²⁴ Toan Vo, in conversation with the author, June 28, 2016.

Memphis to rejoin his mother, who had lived in the area for many years. He worked as a chef in Vietnam, and so it was natural to continue that occupation upon his relocation. He assured me the food he prepares now at Phuong Long is the same food he prepared back in Vietnam, and he did not adjust his style or flavors for an American clientele. He serves a high volume of Vietnamese on Sundays when they come downtown to attend mass or a service at the temple, but the majority of his customers are Americans, many of whom are loyal, regular patrons. This is typical for Vietnamese restaurants in the area; for many Memphians, food is the most direct link to their Vietnamese cohabitants, and restaurants



Figures 15 and 16:
An assortment of
East Asian sauces
(top left) sold
alongside various
Latino sauces (top
right).

Figure 17: Fresh
fish aisle (bottom).

became the unwitting liaisons for outsiders into the community. In addition to the restaurant *Phuong Long*, *Pho Bin*, *Vietnam Restaurant*, and *Shang Hai Oriental Restaurant* (a combination Chinese, Vietnamese, and Thai establishment) make up the Vietnamese culinary options in Midtown, although a fifth, *Saigon Le*, burned down this past March. Farther out Poplar Avenue is *Pho Saigon*, and the first Vietnamese restaurant in Memphis, *Lotus Vietnamese Restaurant* (opened in 1980), is on Summer Avenue, nearly ten miles from Midtown.¹²⁵ Some new restaurants have cropped up in the suburbs more recently. Each restaurant, in Toan Vo's opinion, is different, but authentic to its own style.

From the day the first Vietnamese refugee arrived in Memphis the city has evolved, intentionally or not, in response to their presence. That process is ongoing. In 2003, for instance, Kroger opened a Vietnamese kiosk in Midtown to provide translated information about products and services, and in 2015, a cohort of Memphis musicians toured Vietnam, performing a series of concerts to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of normalized relations between the two nations.¹²⁶ Vietnamese-Americans who grew up in Memphis have a unique set of struggles in reconciling their heritage within the story of Memphis, but if my experience exploring and researching the community is any indication, there is a general enthusiasm to rediscover and embrace that heritage while sharing it with others. Three Rhodes College peers in particular—Pauline Dinh, Andy Nguyen (Figure 18), and Mary Phan—took it upon themselves to introduce me to Vietnamese family and acquaintances in the community from whom they believed my research would benefit, as

¹²⁵ Jody Callahan, "Saigon Le Restaurant Destroyed by Afternoon Fire," *The Commercial Appeal*, March 9, 2016.

¹²⁶ Blake Fontenay "Kiosk at Kroger to aid Vietnamese," *The Commercial Appeal*, June 27, 2003. And: Memphis Music and Culture Tour, April 2015. It is worth noting the annual "Memphis in May" festival, which has honored a different country each year since 1976, has yet to select Vietnam.

well as accompany me on visits to temples, masses, restaurants, and new neighborhoods. During these ventures other youth, with whom neither I nor my collaborators were previously familiar, went out of their way to speak with me—often for extended interviews—about their experiences in and impressions of the Vietnamese community in Memphis. Similar interactions with adults were often more guarded (though when our exchange came about upon the referral of another Vietnamese friend, they accepted my probing questions openly and readily). The *Commercial Appeal* quoted one early refugee who observed

Americans tended to be more private than the communal Vietnamese were used to; in America, “you close your door and watch television.”¹²⁷ But isolation is a two-way



Figure 18: Toan Vo (left) and Andy Nguyen (right) inside Phuong Long.

street, and as more and more first-generation immigrants approach retirement, the bulk of interaction between Vietnamese and the rest of Memphis will fall to the acclimated, linguistically comfortable youth who so eagerly sought to help me learn about their heritage. Inevitably immigrant communities lose cultural traditions and beliefs over time, but the process by which that happens is a natural one, evolving to local contexts. What is lost and what is preserved will compose a new history, one composed of new reactions and

¹²⁷ Charles Goodman, “Vietnamese Mark Second Year of Memphis Life,” *The Commercial Appeal*, April 27, 1977.

experiences fusing elements from Vietnam to Memphis, with everything those origins imply.

The story of Memphis is a complicated one. Southern cities compete for tourist dollars and corporate headquarters with marketable nicknames that capture an idea: Atlanta is “The City Too Busy to Hate,” while New Orleans laid claim to “The Big Easy”; Nashville chose “Music City,” and St. Louis is dubbed the “Gateway to the West.” Memphis, too, has iconic qualities, from its own musical history to barbecue to its location on the Mississippi River. No motto, however, captures the ethos of Memphis quite like “Grit and Grind.” In a blue-collar city that has more than once faced an existential threat—from race riots to Yellow Fever and back to race riots again—the notion the best you can do is grit your teeth and keep grinding captures the powerful spirit of the city. The Vietnamese have only shared in that local story for a brief time, but from their history of dogged perseverance towards a more perfect future there emerges an ethos with which Memphians can relate. The differences that divided the Vietnamese community upon their arrival to Memphis threatened its success, but did not ultimately portend its failure. Instead, the Vietnamese-Americans in Memphis have made their mark on the city, from Midtown to Germantown and everywhere in between, the only way that would make sense: Grit and Grind. The story of Memphis is a complicated one, but, then again, so is the story of the Vietnamese who live there.

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