

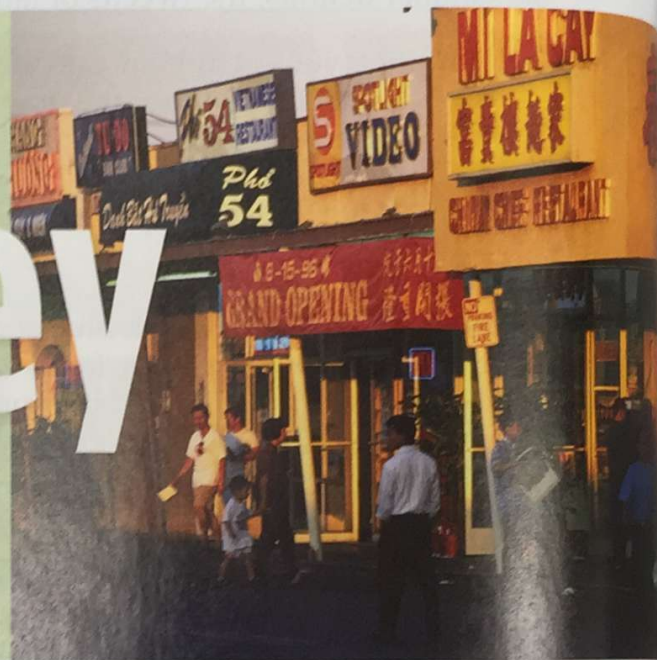
Build Background

Andrew Lam is a San Francisco-based writer who was eleven years old when his family left Vietnam in 1975. When the government of South Vietnam collapsed that same year, two million Vietnamese people dispersed

around the globe. At that time, Vietnam was an agrarian country where most people tended crops and livestock. The traditional religions included Confucianism, in which a key element is ancestor worship.

FROM My Journey Home

ANDREW LAM



In her suburban home with a pool shimmering in the back yard at the edge of Silicon Valley, my mother prays. Every morning she climbs a chair and piously lights a few joss sticks for the ancestral altar on top of the living room's bookcase and mumbles her solemn prayers. On the shelves below, however, stand my father's MBA diploma, his real estate broker's license, my older siblings' engineering and business degrees, my own degree in biochemistry, our combined sports trophies, and, last but not least, the latest installations of my own unending quest for self-reinvention—plaques and obelisk-shaped crystals and framed certificates—my journalism awards.

What mother's altar and the shelves carrying their various knick-knacks underneath seek to tell is the typical Vietnamese-American tragicomedy, one

where Old World Fatalism¹ meets the American Dream. Almost half of Vietnamese living abroad ended up living in North America, and the largest of this population resettled in California.

It is no mistake that the second largest Vietnamese population outside of Vietnam is centered around Silicon Valley. Nor is it mere luck that Vietnamese, drawing from our Confucian traditions which strongly emphasize discipline, respect and education, chose the sciences as a way to enter the American middle class. Here, within two decades or so, we have moved from living at the receiving end of the industrial revolution, have gone from being citizens of a poor agrarian based society, to becoming important players in the Information Age.

1. *Fatalism* is a belief that events are predetermined in such a way that human beings can have no effect on them.

None of this means much to my mother. The most resistant to change in my family, she watches the incense smoke undulate before her eyes and sighs. She came from a small village in the Thai Binh province, the kind that was suspicious of outsiders. Then history swept her away and she became uprooted herself. So far from home and hearth she prays but she also wonders: Do ghosts cross the ocean? Do they hear her solemn prayers amidst this world of tilting computers, soaring planes and satellite dishes and modems? The world has moved on too fast, gone too high tech, too frantic, too bright, so it seems, to accommodate ghosts.

Perhaps it could not be helped. For the Vietnamese living abroad has begun to dream his Golden Dream. It seeped in his psyche one night and he woke in the morning to find, to his own amazement, that he can readily pronounce words like mortgage, escrow,² aerobic, tax shelter, overtime, MBA, BMW, stock options.

Gone is the cyclical nature of his provincial thinking, and lost is his land-bound mentality. He finds that he can see the future. That he is upwardly mobile. He imagines owning his own home, his own business, the kids in college, the kids as becoming important Americans. Indeed, his American optimism has chased away his Vietnamese nightmare. Compared to the bloody battle fields, the malaria-infested New Economic Zone,³ a vindictive communist regime that monitored everyone's movement, the squalid refugee

2. *Escrow* is a document, money, or other property deposited with a third party to be returned upon fulfillment of certain conditions.

3. Unemployed people who crowded Vietnam's cities were once relocated to *New Economic Zones*, theoretically to increase "agricultural output." In fact, most New Economic Zones were patches of jungle in which people

camp scattered across Southeast Asia, the murders and rapes and starving and drowning on the high seas, California is still, indeed, paradise.

And so a community that previously saw itself as exiles, as survivors of some historical tragedy, as a people who were prepared to return to their homeland to tend their abandoned ancestral graves and to face their oppressors, slowly changes its mind. Soon enough houses are bought, jobs are had, children are born, old folks are buried, and businesses and malls are opened. That is to say our roots sink, slowly but deeply, into the American loam.⁴ Soon enough Little Saigons,⁵ up and down the Californian coast as well as elsewhere began to blossom and sprout. And the stories of the horrible war and terrifying escape over the high seas slowly gave way to gossips of new found successes in the Golden Land. . . .

I came here when I was 11. In my teen years I had stopped speaking Vietnamese altogether. Nor do I pray to the spirits of my ancestors any longer. As an adult and a writer, however, I have grown intrigued about my own inheritance. . . .

I am not, of course, unaware that my innocence was gone the moment I crossed the Pacific Ocean to the American shore. Nor am I so sentimental as to suggest, in this age of mobility and information flow, of global economy and hybrid identities, that the return from city to land is possible, especially when the contrary has become *de facto*⁶ world wide. What intrigues me simply is this: what story could I possibly tell that would convey the

4. *Loam* is a type of soil.

5. *Little Saigons* are Vietnamese neighborhoods in cities around the globe. Saigon, the former capital of South Vietnam, is now called Ho Chi Minh City.



transformational experience of a people who were once land bound but have become instead mobile?

For it seems to me that if ritual and storytelling is a way for a people to partake in a shared vision of themselves, then the Vietnamese abroad must find new ways to reconcile between his agrarian past and his cosmopolitan future, between, that is, his laptop and his memories of ghosts.

The new Vietnamese?

I've seen him. He's my little cousin surfing the web and watching Chinese martial art videos dubbed in Vietnamese while talking to his friends on his cell phone in English. Above him the ancestral altar still wafts incense. On the computer screen, images shift and flow, and this too is his new home. He seems to be at ease with all these conflicting ideas, dissimilar languages. He seems both grounded and mobile, and his imagination, his sense of himself is trans-geographical.⁷ Ask what

7. The prefix *trans-* means "across," "beyond," or "through." A *trans-geographical* sense of one's self could refer to a sense of self derived from experience with multiple locations.

he wants to do when he grows up and he shrugs. "Astronaut," he answers matter-of-factly, as if it's the simplest thing in the world. Yet going back three generations and he stands knee deep in mud in his rice fields gawking at the stars. But no more. The stars may very well be possible. His energy is free from the arduous grip of land-bound imagination,

and it is growing and reconstituting in new and marvelous ways.

And recently I read about a farmer who escaped Vietnam to become a well-known, successful businessman in the high-tech industry. He has returned to open shops in Vietnam. I could almost see the farmer turned high-tech entrepreneur as a character in some epic global novel. In his high-rise, he sits staring down into the microchip on his finger and smiles: from certain angles at least, the tiny thing with its grids and lines that combines his ambition and memories, appears like the green rich rice field writ very small. 🍚

Discussion Starter

Meet with a small group to discuss the ways in which immigrants to the United States balance tradition with the need to assimilate in a new country. As a group, discuss why both assimilation and preservation of tradition are important. Also discuss the difficulties immigrants face as they strive to find a balance between the two.