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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

Resurgent Refugee Politics: Historicizing Anti-Communist and Anti-Chinese Demonstrations in  
Little Saigon, Orange County

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

MASTER OF ARTS

in Asian American Studies

by

Tracey Trần Hoàng

Thesis Committee:

Professor Linda Trinh Võ, Chair

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Professor Judy Wu

2022



## DEDICATION

To

my family and friends who have cheered me on through this entire journey.

especially to mẹ. con hy vọng con đã làm mẹ hãnh diện để có một người con giống con.

my cộng đồng who are the subject of my thesis.

my teachers who have taught me everything that I know.

and to my younger self who never would have had the courage to embark on this intellectual journey. you did it.

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

Resurgent Refugee Politics: Historicizing Anti-Communist and Anti-Chinese Demonstrations in

Little Saigon, Orange County

by

Tracey Trần Hoàng

Masters of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Irvine, 2022

Professor Linda Trinh Võ, Chair

This project examines contemporary expressions of two ideologies that permeate the Vietnamese American community in Little Saigon, Orange County by analyzing various forms of media prior to and after the 2020 Presidential Election. It offers an overview of the Vietnamese American tradition of planned community gatherings by looking at instances from the 1980s to the late 2000s where the community protested against perceived Communist and Chinese threats. By connecting these contemporary occurrences to those of the past, this project offers a possible avenue to explain why Donald Trump was an appealing political figure to the community.

## INTRODUCTION



(Image 1: As supporters of Donald Trump gather in front of the US capitol, the Yellow Flag with Three Red Stripes stands out amongst the building and clambering bodies. PC: Lev Radin / Pacific Press/LightRocket via Getty Images)

I begin this project with an anecdote and image that remains burned into my memory. In numerous discussions, elderly family members and members of the cultural and language community organization where I volunteer justified their support of Donald Trump in 2020 with the words, “Donald Trump has the Vietnamese community’s best interest in his mind.” Their efforts to educate and convince me to vote for the Republican candidate included light scolding, utterances that I was too young to understand the issues at hand, and sharing various Facebook posts spreading what has now been identified as false information.

It was only after the brutal and unjust murder of George Floyd that tensions between these individuals and I began to rise. Before, I was content to listen to their perspectives and interject occasionally. As someone decades younger than them, I felt like it was not proper for me to contradict or question their statements, so I rarely spoke up. However, I was angered and dissatisfied with how the Trump administration was dealing with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes. I gathered up the courage to respond to a group chat message from a member of the community organization I am involved with and sent a Facebook post in Vietnamese, explaining the long history of systemic violence that the Black community faced and how his administration, and Donald Trump himself, did not have the Vietnamese community's best interest in mind. I panicked immediately after pressing send. I was worried that my actions would provoke anger from the elders and lead to even more tension. Like my other attempts to push back, I was once again ignored.

As a symbol so heavily commemorated by the community, Vietnamese Americans associate the yellow flag with three red stripes, the former flag of South Viet Nam, with the fight for democracy and freedom against oppressive forces. Seeing the flag at the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the Capitol was intensely unnerving. It was and still is difficult to fathom why the flag was brought to an event that directly attacked the country's democracy. Why did these Vietnamese individuals feel so compelled to fight and assert Donald Trump's claim to the Presidency that they were willing to storm the capitol based on the belief that the election was stolen from Trump? Other Vietnamese American scholars like Long Bui, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Thuy Vo Dang expressed the same sentiments, penning opinion pieces and discussing why this phenomenon may have occurred (Bui 2021; V.T. Nguyen 2021; Wang 2021).

This project is inspired by the tension in the Vietnamese American community leading up to and immediately after the 2020 Presidential Election. My thesis aims to answer the question: how can we explain the support offered by those in the predominantly foreign-born Vietnamese American community toward Donald Trump, a candidate whose political ideologies seem to directly oppose the broader interests of the community? “Resurgent Refugee Politics” argues that two important political threads within the Vietnamese American community—anti-Communism and animosity towards China and the Chinese—give insight into this question. This thesis aims to provide a history of anti-Communist and anti-Chinese sentiments within Little Saigon, one of the largest communities of Vietnamese outside of Viet Nam, and analyze how these ideas permeate the rhetoric and images used during political demonstrations and social media posts prior to and after the 2020 election.<sup>1</sup> Though these posts are centered around the 2020 Presidential Election, they exemplify long-standing anti-Communist and anti-Chinese positions constantly recycled throughout the community. I argue that with his grandiose anti-Chinese and anti-Communist rhetoric, Donald Trump was able to garner support from first-generation Vietnamese Americans who were willing to overlook his anti-immigrant and racist rhetoric.

## **Literature Review**

The Vietnamese refugee community has often been portrayed in American politics and culture as recipients of American freedom and benevolence. We can also see this imperialistic rhetoric in histories of the Viet Nam War, which often used refugees to justify the nation’s involvement in the war. For example, George C. Herring cites rising tension during the Cold War, the fear of the Domino theory coming true, and the “good nature” of the United States as reasons why America participated in the war with Viet Nam (Herring 2004). Viet Thanh Nguyen

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<sup>1</sup> For this thesis, I use two different meanings of “demonstration.” The first being a public meeting or march protesting something or expressing views on a political issue. The other meaning is the outward showing of feelings.

notes that filmmakers have followed suit, positioning the United States as a morally just country whose goal was to liberate Viet Nam from communist forces and ensure that the free world could remain so. The Vietnamese are an afterthought—regulated to the role of victims, except when they are positioned as Việt Công (V.T. Nguyen 2020).

Southeast Asian American scholars have challenged this narrative in the past few decades. Yen Le Espiritu's contribution to Critical Refugee studies, a multidisciplinary field of study that interrogates the politics of refugees and their impacts, has revolutionized the discipline. In her works, Espiritu proposes that academia and scholars should prioritize the perspectives, concerns, knowledge, experiences, and global imaginings of refugees when studying this diasporic community. Espiritu's *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*, like other works by scholars such as Viet Thanh Nguyen and Mimi T. Nguyen, is critical of the works of American scholars who have portrayed the war in Viet Nam as an example of the United States rescuing desperate people from oppressive governments (Espiritu 2014; V.T. Nguyen 2017; M.T. Nguyen 2012). Nhi Lieu highlights that American interference prior to and during the war was highly motivated by its economic interests. The financial relationship between the United States and South Viet Nam was highly stratified, with South Viet Nam being almost entirely reliant on imports from the United States. Although the South Vietnamese government welcomed US commerce as it modernized the country and stimulated growth, it was nevertheless within the US's economic interests to maintain a trade relationship between the two countries. Following other imperial conquests, the United States extracted raw resources and cheap labor from Viet Nam before flooding the country's markets with export products for the local population to purchase (Lieu 2011).

Like Espiritu, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Mimi T. Nguyen, Lieu notes the positioning of Vietnamese Americans as the new model minority (Lieu 2011; V.T. Nguyen 2017; M.T. Nguyen 2012). Vietnamese Americans have been dubbed the “good refugees” due to their successful assimilation into American society. American media has attributed hard work, grit, and perseverance as reasons for Vietnamese refugee success, despite the many barriers they might have faced. Mimi T. Nguyen frames the representation of the refugee around the “debt” that refugees accumulate during their time in the United States and the feelings of gratitude that they are expected to perform in return. The first debt is incurred when refugees were “saved” by American intervention in the war. The second debt arises when the United States “graciously” allows refugees to come to America and start anew. The notion of debt-bound refugees once again positions the United States in a place of power. It rewrites the history of colonization and violence by portraying the United States as a benevolent figure that allowed Southeast Asian refugees to resettle and have a second chance at life (M.T. Nguyen 2012). Nguyen’s work overlaps with Lieu’s work in their analysis of the imperialist and capitalistic reasons that the United States entered the war in the first place.

While Vietnamese refugees were praised for their successful assimilation into the US, they were frequently characterized as clinging to their Vietnamese past. Journalists like Brooke Staggs and Anna Carthaus perpetuate the monolithic narrative that portrays refugees as those who are incapable of letting go of the past (Carthaus 2020; Staggs 2021). Interestingly, these pieces hyperfocus on the strong anti-Communist and anti-Chinese sentiments present in the refugee community. However, Staggs and other journalists do not provide a deeper analysis of the reasons behind these sentiments. As a result, the Vietnamese American community’s inability to “let go” of the war pathologizes them for the very qualities the journalists praise.

Whereas Mimi T. Nguyen argues that refugees' success makes them "good" refugees, the community's inability to let go of the past makes them "bad" refugees. Refugees are positioned as *ungrateful* when they think about the past. These feelings then inhibit their ability to take all the opportunities that America offers. In addition, discussions about the war forced the United States to reckon with its role in the war and the ultimate "fall" of South Viet Nam. As the only war that America has ever "lost", any discussion of "Viet Nam" that invokes feelings of loss on the part of refugees evokes feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety in the United States. Although Phuong Tran Nguyen's *Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon* concurs Nguyen's *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*, Phuong Tran Nguyen does highlight a period during the 1980s when the community's inability to let go of the past depicted them as the "model minority" in the eyes of the American government (P.T. Nguyen 2017). This project will expand upon Phuong Tran Nguyen's work by providing another example where this formulation of the "model minority" was valid.

It is this relationship to the past that drives Karin Aguilar-San Juan's work. *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* is a case study of two Little Saigons, one in Orange County and one in Boston. In her project, Aguilar San-Juan argues that a longing for home permeates efforts of community and placemaking for Vietnamese refugees.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Aguilar San-Juan contends that a specific group, first-generation leaders, have the power to control the memories of the community by dictating the moments and events the community celebrates and commemorates (Aguilar San-Juan 2009). This is a possible explanation for why the community is perceived to be monolithic—any kinds of memories that do not fit into the narratives of these

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<sup>2</sup> "Home" or "homeland" for Vietnamese refugees is a politically and emotionally charged notion. The usage of "home" or "homeland" in this thesis refers to an idealized version of Viet Nam before the war.

leaders are dismissed and even willfully silenced through protests. My work in this thesis will expand upon these ideas to demonstrate that former President Trump received the community's support by validating these memories.

Thuy Vo Dang's article: "The Cultural Work of Anticommunism in the San Diego Vietnamese American Community" can be read with Aguilar San-Juan's work. Both are ethnographic studies of various Vietnamese American communities. Vo Dang further establishes the first-generation as leaders of the community. According to the article, anti-Communism is a form of political and cultural discourse for community building (Vo Dang 2005). That is, anti-Communism is not merely the opposition of the Communist government of Viet Nam or Communist ideologies in general. Instead, it can be used as a tool for educating the younger second generation, placemaking, and community building. By acting on these sentiments, first-generation refugees can unite under a shared bond of pain and loss together (Vo Dang 2005).

Caroline Kieu-Linh Valverde and Christian Collet have also written important works about the Vietnamese American community. These scholars focus on transnationalism and discuss how the politics of Viet Nam impact the lives of refugees abroad and how refugees themselves impact the politics of Viet Nam. Though a large body of water separates them, refugees still keep up with and influence the country they left behind (Valverde 2013; Collet and Lien 2009). Nhu-Ngoc Ong and David Meyer's article regarding electoral politics also deals with transnational issues. Their article also ties into Christian Collet's work with Pei-te Lien. They determined that Vietnamese refugees utilized protests and public demonstrations to voice their thoughts, concerns, and opinions about the Communist Party of Viet Nam (Ong and Meyers 2008). Collet, Lien, Ong, and Meyer argue that refugees took to the streets during the early years of their settlement because they did not have the proper skill set and experiences to participate in



American electoral politics. Protests regarding these transnational issues were the only process in which they could get their voices heard. Although the community has gained political power, as this project will show, protests and public demonstrations remain popular methods for Vietnamese Americans to voice their thoughts, opinions, and perspectives about a host of issues.

The field of Critical Refugee studies has made great strides in deconstructing the narratives of refugees that have been perpetrated on their bodies and partially internalized by the community. Scholars in this field often discuss their criticisms of imperialism, colonialism, and the military-industrial complex; however, those who work within the community may notice that the lived experiences of refugees make it difficult for refugees to follow and accept the criticisms that these scholars have about America and the war. Though Phuong Tran Nguyen, Karin Aguilar-San Juan, Nazli Kibria, and other scholars have gone into the community to do their research, more work does need to be done to focus on the voices of those who reside in the diaspora so that these refugees can express how they view and understand the world and their place in the world.

## **Methodology**

This project ties a contemporary moment in time to a longer history of the community. The project analyzes various posters and signs held at political rallies held in Little Saigon and Facebook material circulated by first-generation members of this community. My decision to focus on those in Little Saigon is based on the fact that it is one of the largest communities of Vietnamese Americans in the country. I am also a member of the community. In addition, my decision to focus on the first-generation Vietnamese Americans stems from the fact that the

community is predominantly foreign-born, thus making them the majority.<sup>3</sup> As the majority, this group has the loudest voice and often controls who gets to be included in the community.

Another reason that I chose to focus on first-generation members is because of their high participation in these political rallies and Facebook groups.

I will analyze images, posters, and Facebook posts to highlight the pervasive presence of anti-Communist and anti-Chinese anxieties in the community. My decision to include YouTube clips of these political rallies is because the app is easily accessible, and therefore, makes it easier for community members to circulate footage outside Facebook. Facebook was chosen as many Vietnamese Americans use the app to connect with one another. With its ability to circulate information at the click of a button, the social media platform allows users to create a sense of nostalgia about Viet Nam that at one point, was only possible by watching ethnic musical and variety shows like *Paris by Night*.

Facebook posts and comments were taken from various groups and fan pages showing support for Donald Trump. They range from 2019 to early 2022 and were chosen based on the number of comments and “likes.” These Facebook groups and fan pages help connect ethnic Vietnamese across the country; however, to ensure that these posts, comments, and images were from first-generation Vietnamese Americans living in Little Saigon, I proceeded to vet any material of interest. Firstly, I checked to see if the person’s profile stated that they live in Orange County. I then checked to see if they had previously lived in Viet Nam. The posters from

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that this also means that there are many first-generations who are not refugees. These individuals are from the post-war era and have lived under the Communist/Socialist regime in Viet Nam. Though anti-Communist sentiments may not resonate as strongly with this post-war generation, many have resentment towards China and its people. Therefore, the arguments in this thesis apply to most of the first-generation. For clarity’s sake, I will use the word “refugee” to denote the group that arrived in the United States during the different “waves” of migration.

political rallies were chosen based on one of these few reasons: the person holding the sign fits into the demographic of those being studied, the number of people holding signs expressing the same sentiment, the images on the sign being particularly shocking, and the signs being held mirrored the rhetoric of what was being said at the rallies.

In analyzing these materials, this project provides a timeline of various moments when those in Little Saigon acted upon anti-Communist and anti-Chinese sentiments. These two ideologies permeate the Vietnamese American community. I begin by looking at instances in the 1980s and conclude with the late 2000s to exemplify that these ideologies are ingrained heavily within Little Saigon and offer a possible avenue to explain why Donald Trump was an appealing political figure to the community. Due to time limitations, this project does not cover every instance the community demonstrated and vocalized their opinions based on these two ideologies. My decision to highlight the moments that I did are based on the amount of coverage that each instance received or because these are moments that are still talked about within the community today. I then complicate the occurrence of anti-Chinese sentiment within the community by highlighting the presence of ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese living in Little Saigon.

As it is impossible to concretely predict the direction that the Vietnamese American community will take, the conclusion of this project is speculative in nature. Though I highlight the shifting dynamics between the different generations within Little Saigon, there is no easy answer to this question.

**Traversing the Pacific: The Great Migration from Viet Nam to America**

Scholars typically divide Vietnamese migration to the United States into three “waves.”

<sup>4</sup>As noted by Hien Duc Do, the first “wave” of refugees began in April of 1975 and extended until approximately 1977 (Do 1999). In the weeks before the Fall of Saigon, the United States evacuated American personnel and their dependents and Vietnamese who were affiliated with the government. This evacuation process occurred in the form of giant helicopters and aircraft under “Operation Frequent Wind” (Do 1999). In the weeks following the Fall of Saigon, many of these refugees left Viet Nam using their own small boats and aircraft and were picked up by the American Navy and cargo ships that were waiting off the coast of Viet Nam. The refugees of the first “wave” are distinguished from refugees of later “waves” as many early refugees worked for the U.S. government, American firms, businesses, or the Vietnamese government. It also included members of high-ranking military officials. The United States government feared that if Viet Nam were to fall to Communist forces, these individuals would be targeted and killed. These refugees were relatively educated, and many could speak some level of English. Those who were a part of the first “wave” also were from urban areas, so they were already acclimated to city life. For these reasons, the United States government believed that these individuals were prepared for their new life in America (Do 1999).

The second “wave” of refugees began in 1978. As Nhi Lieu notes, hundreds of thousands of people subsequently followed in the footsteps of the first “wave” of refugees by escaping Viet Nam from the late 1970s to the 1980s (Lieu 2011). Those in this new “wave” traversed through dangerous and dense jungles on foot (through Cambodia to the borders of Thailand) or risked their lives by sailing to asylum countries on small, poorly constructed homemade boats and

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<sup>4</sup> While most literature cites that there are three different waves of refugees, the reality is that each grouping can be broken up into even smaller waves. Thus, I choose to put “waves” in quotations to indicate that I acknowledge this fact, but am using the notion of three “waves” for simplicity’s sake.

vessels (Lieu 2011; Do 1999). It is this “wave” of refugees that would become known as the “boat people.” Among this “wave,” the death rate was exceptionally high. This is due to the various challenges such as their vessels being unable to withstand the weather conditions at sea, Thai pirate attacks, their limited knowledge of navigation skills, and a lack of adequate provisions due to spatial issues (Do 1999). The demographic of this “wave” of refugees was much more varied when compared to those who left before them. Some of these individuals grew up in urban settings and had the same skillsets as the first “wave,” while others grew up in the countryside. It is also notable that this “wave” contained a large number of ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese that migrated out of Viet Nam. Like the first “wave,” these individuals left Viet Nam to escape political oppression. In addition, the Communist government of Viet Nam had been enacting major social, economic, and political reforms that made life difficult for average citizens. Thus, these individuals set out to countries like the United States to escape this life of poverty and oppression (Do 1999).

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw fewer Vietnamese escaping by boat. In 1980, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) passed the Orderly Departure Program (ODP). Under the ODP’s guidelines, the United States allowed for the immigration of Vietnamese to the country. There were three methods by which an individual could qualify for the program. The first is family reunification—where a Vietnamese American citizen could sponsor a family member. Other ways an individual could qualify were if they were a former U.S. employee or a political detainee of reeducation camps. As discussed above, most high-ranking military and government officials were evacuated in the days preceding the Fall of Saigon. Lower-ranking military officials had to stay behind and were thrown into reeducation camps as they were considered traitors to the Communist party (Hoang 2016). These reeducation

camp prisoners immigrated to the United States under ODP's subprogram Humanitarian Operation (HO) (Do 1999). Scholars typically characterized those who immigrated to the United States through these programs as the third "wave" of refugees. Like those of the first and second "wave" of refugees, those in the "third" wave left Viet Nam out of fear of political oppression. What sets this "wave" apart from the other waves is that these individuals had lived under the Communist regime in Viet Nam for an extended period and experienced dire living conditions. As Tuan Hoang notes, those put into reeducation camps suffered greatly. They were starved, tortured, and forced to make confessions of "crimes" they did not commit. Though family visits were rare, these meetings allowed prisoners to learn about the dire living conditions outside these reeducation camps (Hoang 2016). For these individuals, their time in these camps only strengthened their resentment toward the Vietnamese Communist regime.

### **A Home In this New Country: Orange County's Little Saigon**

Today, Orange County's Little Saigon is a bustling business and residential district of over 180,000 thousand, according to the 2011 US Census Bureau. Little Saigon extends from the city of Westminster into neighboring cities (Garden Grove, Fountain Valley, Santa Ana) (Vo Dang 2013). However, decades ago, the cities Westminster and Garden Grove were "homogenous Anglo suburban communities" experiencing an economic decline (Vo and Danico 2004; Aguilar San-Juan 2009). As the two cities were economically depressed, the residential areas and commercial spaces of Westminster and Garden Grove were affordable when compared to other counties in California (Vo and Danico 2004). Upon their arrival in Orange County after a brief period of living in one of America's four resettlement camps, a select group of Vietnamese refugees took advantage of the declining economy and relatively inexpensive spaces to open small ethnic businesses.

By the early to mid-1980s, the once homogenous (white) community shifted into a heterogeneous one with the arrival of Southeast Asian refugees and their businesses (Lieu 2011). Although these ethnic businesses helped revitalize the area's economy, white residents of Westminster resented the growth. However, these residents could not limit the community's development and soon positioned themselves as allies to Vietnamese Americans as these ethnic businesses helped to recuperate the city's economy. In addition, Orange County was a highly conservative space and a Republican stronghold. By aligning themselves with this conservative ideology, Vietnamese refugees made themselves into a population that white residents could work with and support<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to relatively inexpensive spaces, Vietnamese Americans were motivated to settle in Orange County due to its warm weather, similar to Viet Nam. As the community continued to make a name for itself, Vietnamese Americans who settled in other states began to re-migrate to Little Saigon to be closer to those who shared the same experiences (Wong et al., 2011). The community would continue to grow as Vietnamese American citizens in Little Saigon began to sponsor their family members who were able to immigrate due to the ODP and HO. Secondary migration, family reunification, relatively affordable housing, and greater economic opportunities are reasons many former military officers of South Vietnam are found in Little Saigon Orange County. Their presence is an important reason for the community's intense anti-Communist politics and conservatism (Vo Dang 2013).

### **A Shift in Support: The Transition from 2016 to 2020**

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, South Viet Nam (Việt Nam Cộng Hòa) was known as the Republic of Viet Nam. North Viet Nam (Việt Nam Dân chủ Cộng Hòa) was known as the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam. As these refugees were supporters of the Republic of Viet Nam, they already had aligned themselves with the values of a Republic, which is one possible explanation for why so many Vietnamese refugees support the Republican party. This is also one possible reason why Vietnamese refugees are suspicious of the Democratic party: North Viet Nam, their enemy, claimed itself to be a Democratic Republic.

By 2016, Orange County's Little Saigon had become one of the largest Vietnamese American communities in the United States and gained increasing political clout locally and at the state level. The dominant narrative surrounding the Vietnamese Americans is that they are conservative, right-leaning, and have a high identification with the Republican party (Wong et al., 2011). However, recent surveys have shown that nationally, political affiliation to a party has become more varied throughout the years. Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote (APIA), Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC), and Asian American Pacific Islander Data's (AAPI Data) report on their "Inclusion, not Exclusion: Spring 2016 Asian American Voter Survey" (AAVS 2016) exemplifies this shift by finding that 48% of Vietnamese Americans surveyed considered themselves Moderates (AAVS 2016).<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, however, there is some truth to this dominant narrative, as the large number of first-generation Vietnamese Americans skew the community towards conservative ideologies, especially in Orange County, where there are a lot of former South Vietnamese veterans. The Asian American Voter Survey of 2020 showed that Vietnamese Americans preferred the Republican presidential candidate over the Democratic candidate. Image 2 depicts Joe Biden's favorability, while Image 3 depicts Donald Trump's. From the two images, it is evident that the Vietnamese American community strongly favored and showed support to former President Trump. Compared to other ethnic Asian communities, close to one-half of registered Vietnamese American voters stated that Donald Trump was "somewhat favorable" or "very favorable." While Filipino Americans were more split, the remaining Asian ethnic communities surveyed all

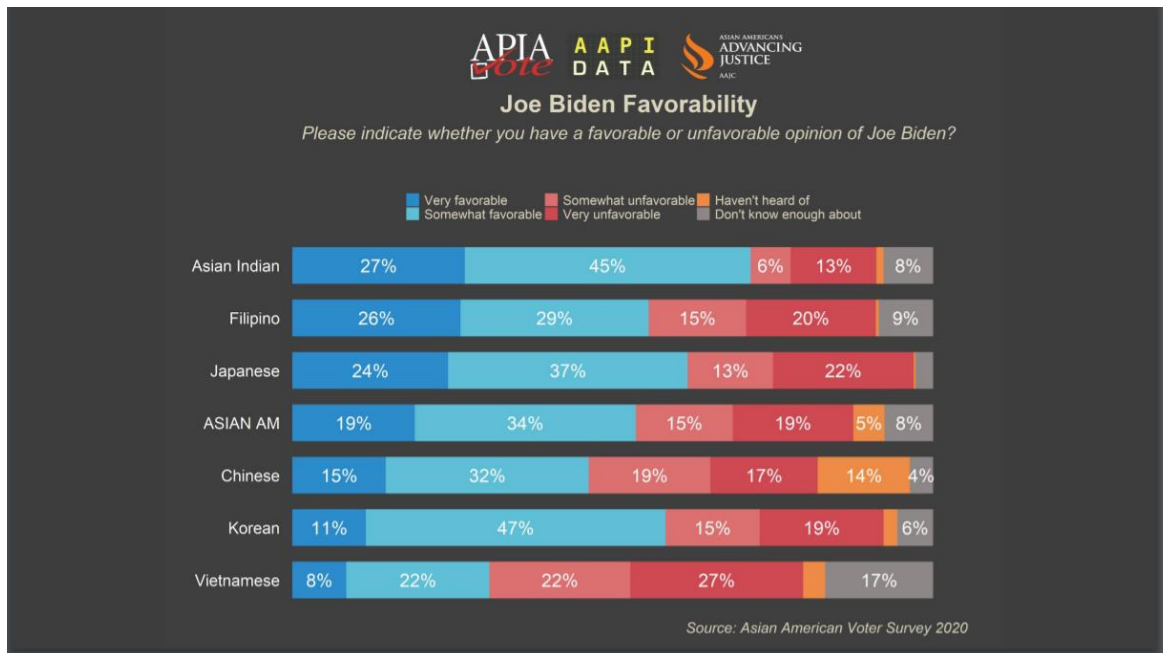
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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that this survey was done nationally and only surveyed 1,212 registered voters who identified as Asian Americans. The study surveyed the six largest ethnicity groups, thus meaning that the number of Vietnamese Americans who were questioned is less than the 1,212 total. While this survey may indicate that nationally, political alignment to a political party is shifting, it does not represent all communities of Vietnamese Americans. This is especially true for Little Saigon, Orange County which has a history of being staunchly conservative leaning.

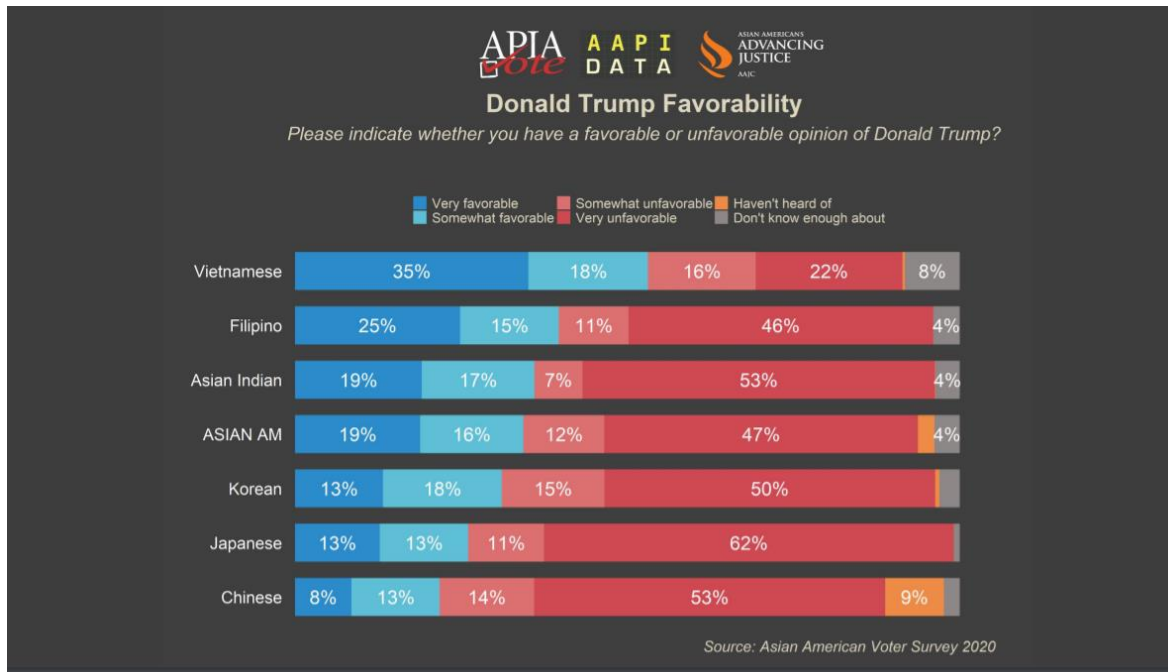


expressed approval ratings of one-third or less (AAVS 2020). Joe Biden only received a 30% approval rating from the Vietnamese Americans studied. Although the survey results do not reflect the opinions of all Vietnamese Americans, it was a good indication of the political candidate that the community supported during the election year.

As predicted, many Vietnamese Americans voted for President Trump in 2020. As this differed from other ethnic Asian communities, Vietnamese Americans were heavily scrutinized; many news sites reported on this phenomenon and tried to explain why the community supported a candidate who seemingly did not have their best interest in mind. There is no neat or singular answer to this question. However, this project attempts to provide those curious with important contextualizing and connections for understanding the complexity of refugee political formations.



(Image 2: Joe Biden Favorability. PC: Asian American Voter Survey 2020. Screenshot courtesy of the author.)



(Image 3: Donald Trump Favorability. PC: Asian American Voter Survey 2020. Screenshot courtesy of the author.)

### “He Fought Against Communists”: The Resurgence of Buried Sentiments

In the years leading up to the 2020 Election, many first-generation Little Saigon residents utilized the pro-Trump rallies they planned as spaces where they could act on their anti-Communist sentiments. “Socialist, Communists, it’s no good. Yeah. They try to harass people. They try to, you know, make people nervous, worry” (CBS Los Angeles 1:09-1:19). So spoke Joseph Ngo at the Rally for Reform and Regime Change protest on February 26, 2019, organized by residents of Orange County in response to a visit by Donald Trump to Viet Nam. The gathered Vietnamese Americans urged the President to be tougher on Viet Nam’s Communist government. These individuals gathered on Bolsa street in Westminster to watch performances that protested the current Vietnamese government. Many women donned scarves and áo dài, a traditional Vietnamese dress, designed to resemble the yellow flag with three red stripes. As an important cultural symbol, the áo dài evokes nostalgia associated with a gendered image of a(n) (imagined) homeland that those in the diaspora yearn for and continue to make efforts to protect

(Lieu 2011). Many male participants were seen donned in military uniforms, a call back to their time fighting in the war, but also an assertion that they still are nationalists fighting to protect Viet Nam from Communist forces. Participants of the Rally for Reform and Regime Change protest were also seen holding signs emphasizing their confidence in President Trump's ability to negotiate with the Communist regime over human rights issues. As hinted above, this instance was not the first time Little Saigon residents rallied for Trump, nor would it be the last as the 2020 presidential election grew closer.

On Saturday, August 29, 2020, a group of Vietnamese Americans took to the streets of Little Saigon to express their support for the Trump Administration. The group, predominantly middle-aged but covering all age groups, stood across Asian Garden Mall holding up "Make American Great Again" (MAGA) flags and cardboard signs saying "TRUMP 2020," "GOD BLESS TRUMP," "COMMUNISTS MUST LEAVE," and "KEEP AMERICA GREAT." (These signs can be observed in images 4 and 5.) Footage by TubeAnon from this rally shows the group repeatedly chanting "Four More Years" and "Donald Trump" (TubeAnon 0:27-0:30).



(Image 4: Two elderly men at a Pro-Trump rally in Westminster on August 29, 2020. PC: Thiện Lê/Người Việt)



(Image 5: The community gathers at a pro-Trump rally in Westminster on August 29, 2020. PC: Thiện Lê/Người Việt)

A little over a month later, Little Saigon experienced a MAGA car and motorbike rally supporting Trump. Residents joined with those from San Diego, San Bernardino, Riverside Counties, and even Northern California to gather behind the newspaper building *Việt Mỹ* on Saturday, October 3, to express their support for Trump and his reelection campaign. Video footage of the rally shows participants joyously dancing, posing, and waving flags before they set off repeatedly down the main streets of Little Saigon (Moonlight 0:00-1:05). The rally consisted of over 200 cars, trucks, and motorcycles. The vehicles were adorned with a combination of red “Trump Pence 2020” flags, the American flag, and the yellow flag with three red stripes. When the rally finished, participants drove home, expressing their need to rest up quickly. They needed energy to participate in subsequent motorcar rallies that would take place

every Saturday in October (Đặng 2020). In response to questions about why the participants of the rally supported Donald Trump, rally organizer Michelle Do responded: “He fought against communists. He fought against socialism. And that’s the reason why we are supporting him” (CBS Los Angeles 0:25-0:33).

While residents of Little Saigon took to the streets in support of the President, they also collaborated with Vietnamese Americans in other states to arouse support for the President through various social media platforms. In 2019 and 2020, Facebook groups like “Vietnamese are Huge Fans of Donald J. Trump and the United States of America,” “Diễn đàn những người yêu thích Donald Trump j” (“Forum for Donald Trump j Lovers”), and “Ủng Hộ TT Trump Xóa Cộng Sản và Độc Tài” (“Support for President Trump to Erase Communism and Dictatorship”) rose in popularity. Vietnamese Americans would also create fan pages supporting the President with names like “Fans Trump Vietnamese,” “Vietnamese Americans & Friends for Trump,” “Trump Victory – Vietnamese American for Trump,” and “Vietnamese for Trump.” Within these digital communities, residents would post and share their thoughts about the current administration, Trump’s accomplishments, their hopes for his re-election, and their concerns that the United States would turn into a communist and socialist state if Joe Biden won. Despite Trump’s eventual loss in 2020, many of these groups and fan pages are still active today. Members continuously show their support for the former President by engaging (liking and hearting) posts that express wishes that Trump will “trở lại” or come back to the United States (and social media). Posts about Joe Biden’s administration are often met with criticism, curses, and flooding support for the former President. In a post that revealed the seven Republican Senators who voted to convict the former President during his second impeachment trial shared by “Diễn đàn những người yêu thích Donald Trump j,” commenters were seen expressing their

anger at the betrayal.<sup>7</sup> “The Communists are taking over (to the point that when you are around one), even the smell lets you know they’re a motherfucker” one middle-aged commentator said.<sup>8</sup> Their comment received 32 likes.

These social media comments, rallies, and cardboard signs make clear the extent of support that Trump has from large numbers of Vietnamese Americans due to the belief that Trump is a fierce opponent of Communism. Though the participants of these political rallies and members of these social media groups vary in age, the vast majority are middle-aged and first-generation migrants. Even though the Vietnam War ended over 45 years ago, memories of its violence, loss, and pain have not dimmed in the eyes of these individuals. These ongoing memories have driven these community members to demonstrate, organize, and rally together because they believe their memories and lived experiences are being opposed, belittled, and erased. However, these demonstrations are not new in Little Saigon. In fact, the community has a rich history of organizing protests, rallies, and demonstrations against perceived Communist threats. The following sections will highlight some key incidents in Little Saigon’s history to indicate how deeply entrenched anti-Communist ideologies are in Vietnamese American life.

### **We Can Still Win This: Early Attempts to Reclaim Viet Nam**

As Nhi Lieu notes, anti-Communist sentiment within Orange County’s white suburban community receded into the background and was replaced with an acceptance of multiculturalism in the 1980s (Lieu 2011). However, Orange County would have a new crusader against Communism in the form of Vietnamese refugees.<sup>9</sup> Beginning in the 1980s, Ronald

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<sup>7</sup> This was posted on February 14, 2021 and received over 200 likes in a matter of 3 days. The comment was made on the same day of the post.

<sup>8</sup> Quote translated by author. Words in parenthesis added by author to provide more context. For privacy reasons, I have hidden the identity of the commentator. However, they are a resident of Little Saigon.

<sup>9</sup> For more information about politics in suburban Orange County, read Lisa McGirr’s *Suburban Warriors*.

Reagan's neoconservative policies encouraged and motivated the strong anti-Communist sentiments within the first "wave" of refugees. According to Phuong Tran Nguyen, both the United States and the first "wave" refugees were demasculinized by the loss of the war. America was both ashamed and embarrassed by its very public defeat in what they believed would be an easy war; as such, the United States attempted to save its reputation by rewriting the war as one focused on saving Vietnamese subjects from the cruelties of Communism. Therefore, the United States was seen as the holy savior of refugees (Espiritu 2014, P.T. Nguyen 2017).

The first "wave" of refugees viewed themselves as nationalists and hailed from privileged backgrounds; this "wave" comprised predominantly high-ranking military officials, political elites, and those who had ties to American businesses and government (Do 1999). Despite their backgrounds, many of these refugees, particularly male refugees, had difficulties finding employment. If they could find work, these jobs were beneath their skill level or education level (Kibria 1990 and Kibria 1994). Their inability to find work resulted in a shift in family dynamics, where mothers and wives became the family's breadwinners. This, in conjunction with the guilt of leaving behind other family members and fellow compatriots in Vietnam, caused these male first "wave" refugees to feel emasculated. Showing support and reiterating anti-Communist sentiment during a time of heightened anti-Communist beliefs due to Reagan's neoconservative policies offered a way for refugees to regain their authority. Vietnamese refugees could see themselves as "equal partners with America in the war against communism" by cooperating with President Reagan. (P.T. Nguyen 2017).

Spurred into action by Reagan's support and the need to re-establish their authority at home and in public, these refugees formed coalitions with the goal of taking back their former country from the Communist party. In 1980, former Southern Vietnamese army colonel Võ Đại



Tôn founded the US-based group: Overseas Vietnamese Volunteer Forces for the Restoration of Vietnam. Along with exiled Laotian general Vang Pao, Võ answered previous calls by the nationalistic group *Trắng Đen* for refugees to take back Viet Nam. Vang Pao claimed to have had over 300,000 Hmong troops in the jungle of Laos at his beck and call. The Vietnamese American community rallied behind Võ and Vang Pao until Võ was captured by the Vietnamese government (P.T. Nguyen 2017). Also in 1980, Hoàng Cơ Minh, an admiral in the South Vietnamese navy, founded the National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam, once with the goal of “taking back” Vietnam. Though Hoàng Cơ Minh would lose his life trying to lead an incursion through the jungles of Laos in 1987, he and the Front were able to garner the support of many Vietnamese Americans.

Between 1980 and 1987, the Front was able to fundraise money by putting on multiple nationalist musical events and beauty pageants. They even opened two pho restaurants to raise funds for their guerilla forces (P.T. Nguyen 2017). Võ Đại Tôn and Hoàng Cơ Minh’s stories are just two out of the hundreds of those motivated to fight against Communism by Ronald Reagan’s political policies in the 1980s. Hoàng Cơ Minh was supported by thousands of refugees and managed to fundraise millions of dollars for his resistance movement. The widespread support of these efforts indicates the extent to which the refugee community held strong anti-Communist sentiments. As self-proclaimed nationalists and former protectors of their beloved country, these refugees felt strong resentment towards the Communist party for taking over Vietnam. They often felt shame and guilt for leaving behind the country they had promised to protect. These feelings of anger and the need to take back their country were heightened and even encouraged by President Reagan’s neoconservative policies and his secret support for “freedom fighters.” It

offered an appealing way for refugees to regain their honor and masculinity.<sup>10</sup> By answering the call to fight against Communism, the community could be seen as the “model minority” (Espiritu 2014; P.T. Nguyen 2017). This unique version of the “model minority” was given to them both because of their “enthusiastic and uncritical” embrace of the American dream, their wholehearted support of the US government’s neoconservative policies, and their willingness to fight alongside the country as America engaged in a war against Communism (Espiritu 2014).

### **A String of Murders and Death threats: Violence Against Members of Press**

The political atmosphere and prominence of the Front cultivated an environment in Little Saigon where an individual had to be seen as staunchly anti-communist. Any behavior that deviated from this was met with death threats, arson, or murder. Between 1981 and 1989, Vietnamese American journalists became the target of these threats. In total, five journalists and two individuals related to these journalists and the press were killed (Thompson 2015; Pinsky and Reyes 1987). Magazine publisher Pham Van Tap, also known as Hoai Dep Tu, was asleep in his Garden Grove office when it caught fire on August 9, 1987. Numerous reports detailed how Pham was heard screaming for help, before he died from smoke inhalation. Pham’s magazine, MAI, was known to carry ads for three companies involved in commerce with Vietnam: companies that shipped packages or wired money to those in the country. A few days after his passing, a communique from a group named the Vietnamese Party to Exterminate the Communist and Restore the Nation (VOEARN) was sent to the Vietnamese American press

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<sup>10</sup> Due to time restraints, I am unable to fully discuss the gendered roles that different groups of refugees took on during this period. Although this section discusses the efforts of refugee men to regain their masculinity, this is not to say that refugee women had no role in these anti-Communist demonstrations. Although refugee women gained an elevated status as the new breadwinners of the family, their efforts in these demonstrations reaffirmed traditional gendered roles. By that I mean, these refugee women were limited to being participants in beauty pageants, performers at fundraising concerts, or helpers at these pho restaurants.

(Pinsky and Reyes 1987). VOECRN claimed responsibility for Pham’s murder because running these ads in his magazine exemplified that he supported the Communist Party. In their worlds, Pham was “a greedy character who supported the Communists” (Thompson 2015; FRONTLINE 2015; Rowley and Thompson 2015).

VOECRN would eventually claim responsibility for the murders and failed murder attempts of other Vietnamese press members who were believed to “support” Communist Viet Nam (Schou 2007; Rowley and Thompson 2015; Thompson 2015). These instances of community representatives killing fellow refugees over their perceived willingness to work with the Communists highlight the strong anti-Communist sentiment that resided in the community. In addition, it exemplifies the lengths that some in the community would go to maintain this notion of what it meant to be Vietnamese American. To be a nationalist, one had to wholeheartedly deny any relations with Communist Viet Nam (Valverde 2012). Despite the VOECRN claiming responsibility for the murders of these journalists, no one was arrested, and no justice has been brought to the families of the victims (Thompson 2015).

Despite the sensationalistic aspects of the story, the narrative behind these murders is more nuanced and complex than it appears. In a documentary by PBS, Frontline, and ProPublica, FBI documents reveal that the bureau believed VOECRN was a coverup for the assassination branch of Hoàng Cơ Minh’s National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam. The documents obtained included interviews with former leaders of the Front. Allegedly, these leaders confirmed that the Front was involved with the murders of the journalists, despite the VOECRN previously claiming responsibility.<sup>11</sup> In the documentary, the individuals interviewed

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<sup>11</sup> Since the publication of Thompson’s article and the release of the ProPublica and FRONTLINE’s documentary, Viet Tan, an advocacy group whose founders were leaders of the National United Front, has claimed that their group was not responsible for these murders. They have also claimed that the leaders interviewed in the documentary were

claimed that being perceived as a Communist or an enemy of the Front would gain the group's attention. To silence them, the group would allegedly offer bribes before sending death threats. If their warnings were not heeded, the Front would proceed to murder these "Communist sympathizers" (Rowley and Thompson 2015; Thompson 2015).

Nguyen Tu A was another alleged victim of the Front. Nguyen was the publisher of the Westminster-based newspaper *Viet Press* in the 1980s. At its prime, *Viet Press* had a circulation of 7,000. In one article, Nguyen voiced his criticisms of the Front and questioned the validity of their propaganda to show their achievements. After the publication, Nguyen received threats that "forced him to live in a near-constant state of wariness" (Thompson 2015). On the night of his murder attempt, Nguyen received a cryptic phone call from an unknown man telling him that his brother had been involved in a car accident and that he needed to rush over to the hospital. Though Nguyen was worried for his brother, he was also wary due to the numerous death threats he had been receiving. Nguyen called the police, who confirmed that his brother was not in the hospital and there had been no reports of any car crashes that night. Nguyen had narrowly escaped a trap.

By ruthlessly repressing any dissent, the refugee community was able to paint itself as a united community against Communism, which reinforced their image as "the model minority" in the eyes of America during the 1980s (P.T. Nguyen 2017). Reagan's escalation of Cold War

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misrepresented or misquoted. ProPublica and FRONTLINE have maintained that they merely were reporting based on the evidence that they found (FBI documents). ProPublica and FRONTLINE have also stated that since the release of the documentary, they did receive numerous notes from readers and viewers who wanted to share their similar accounts.

As Viet Tan still maintains that the National United Front had nothing to do with these murders, I have chosen to use the words alleged and allegedly in this portion.

For more information please refer to: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/a-note-from-frontline-and-propublica/> and <https://www.pbs.org/publiceditor/blogs/ombudsman/unsolved-murders-a-vietnam-battle-still-being-fought-in-this-country/>

rhetoric renewed the anti-Communist sentiments in the country broadly. Within Rowley and Thompson's FRONTLINE and ProPublica documentary, one private investigator alleges that the FBI and CIA may have helped with the Front's operations (Rowley and Thompson 2015). If true, this aligns with Reagan's support of secret guerilla groups in the 1980s and validates Phuong Tran Nguyen's argument that this sentiment was encouraged and supported by the United States. Once again, this "model minority" formulation was unique; it was not solely based on educational or economic success.<sup>12</sup> Instead, it was contingent on a refugee's acceptance of core values and willingness to fight against America's ideological enemy: Communism. Becoming the model minority was a method by which refugees, specifically male refugees, could regain their masculinity by being viewed favorably by the United States and repair their fractured pride for losing the war and their country by continuing the fight against Communism.

### **The Poster Seen across the World: The Hi-Tek Incident**

Immediately preceding and following the Fall of Saigon, the first "wave" of refugees escaped Vietnam. As previously discussed, the first "wave" of refugees were high-ranking military and government officials and those who had strong ties to the American government and businesses. Lower-status military and government officials were left behind in Vietnam; these individuals would make up a large percentage of what many scholars classify as the third "wave" of refugees. Their experiences living under the Communist regime only strengthened their hatred of that political ideology. Subsequently, these individuals would reignite the anti-Communist sentiments of the Vietnamese American community when they arrived.

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<sup>12</sup> Due to time restraints, I am unable to discuss the "model minority" myth as an attempt of Vietnamese Americans to align themselves more with whiteness and white values and assert themselves as "definitively not-black." For more information about this topic, see Ellen D. Wu's *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*.

As Tuan Hoang notes in his article “From Reeducation Camps to Little Saigons: Historicizing Vietnamese Diasporic Anticommunism,” the sudden loss of Viet Nam shocked many in South Viet Nam. Many were angry that Saigon surrendered without a fight. This is, in fact, true. Dương Văn Minh, South Viet Nam’s last President, announced unconditional surrender before any of his troops in Saigon were attacked (Hoang 2016). Soldiers began to abandon their posts and tried to conceal any association with the Saigon regime. The abrupt manner of the loss, along with the experience of self-erasure of their identity for survival, once again strengthened the decades-old hatred that these individuals had for the Communist party. These soldiers were no longer national heroes protecting their country: they were the “losers.” If they wanted to survive, they had to conform to this new regime and accept that they were “traitors” of the state rather than protectors of their country.

The harsh living conditions in reeducation camps also contributed to the growing anti-Communist sentiments within these prisoners. Furthermore, though it was rare to receive visits from their family in the early years of their sentence, many prisoners would eventually learn about the dire living conditions their families faced. Starvation was common both within and outside the walls of the prisons. Memoirs of family members of the incarcerated also expressed the heavy toll poverty had on them. The shared suffering of prisoners and other citizens in Viet Nam reinforced the belief in many that the Communist party oppressed the entire country. These political prisoners would eventually gain their freedom and come to the United States as a part of the Humanitarian Operation in the 1990s (Do 1999). As they settled in the pre-existing ethnic enclave, these new refugees, still scarred by their experiences living under the Communist regime, would reinvigorate the anti-Communist sentiments within their community.

The Hi-Tek TV and VCR incident is regarded as one of the most notorious anti-communist protests in Little Saigon. The demonstration lasted just short of two months, with crowds of close to 15,000 gathering in front of the electronics store (Ebnet 2000; Ressler 1999). The protest began when Trần Văn Trường, the owner of Hi-Tek TV and Video, hung a poster of communist leader Hồ Chí Minh as well as the communist flag up in his store. According to Trần, he hung up the two items during the Martin Luther King holiday to commemorate Dr. King's courage and to exercise his first amendment rights of free speech.

Trần Văn Trường escaped Viet Nam as a boat person in 1980; he would arrive in California that same year. To make money to support his family, Trần began to sell televisions and VCRs that he salvaged from dumpsters. His store, Hi-Tek TV and VCR, opened in 1996. Following the economic decline of Vietnam, the Communist Party turned to those in the diaspora in hope of boosting industry and bringing capital into the country (Ha 2002). Both the United States and Viet Nam sought to improve their relationship in the 1990s. The removal of the US embargo on Vietnamese goods in 1994 and the eventual extension of full diplomacy in 1995 during the Clinton administration made it easier for refugees to travel back to Vietnam (Vo Dang 2013). Tran made multiple trips back to Viet Nam; his attitude towards communism shifted from his observations. He believed that real, meaningful social change had occurred under the communist regime. Furthermore, he began to experience the benefits of trade between the United States and Viet Nam. Tran wanted to spread his findings with his community and evoke discussion, so he began to express his views on fliers and in newspapers. He also organized debates. His efforts were largely unsuccessful until the poster and communist flag were hung up (Ha 2002).

His actions evoked more than just discussion. The close to two-month-long protest attracted thousands of refugees from across the country. Though both the first and second generations gathered and united to protest against Trần, the most vocal group were those in the first-generation, especially those who lived under the Communist regime (*Saigon U.S.A.*). Their memories of the dire living conditions during their incarceration galvanized them to protest Trần. They were infuriated; Tran's action of hanging the communist flag and his belief that meaningful social change was occurring under the Communist regime undermined their lived experiences in Viet Nam. Tired and frustrated from the time the Communist Party of Viet Nam silenced their voices, these refugees used the protest to vocalize their frustrations and reinvigorate anti-Communist sentiments within the community. Holding signs declaring "Communists are Invading America," "Down with Communism," and "Hồ Chi Minh is a Mass Murderer," refugees in Little Saigon and beyond made it clear that communism had no place in the community (Ressner 1999).

The previous two sections highlight that during the era of Reagan's neoconservative ideologies, the Vietnamese American community was positioned as the "model minority" both for their economic progress and for their willingness to fight against the Communists. However, in the case of the Hi-Tek incident, the American public was not sympathetic to these protests. Many individuals did not understand why, after two decades since the war ended, the community could not let go of the past (Ha 2002). In this instance, Vietnamese Americans were now positioned as "bad refugees" for being unable to forget the past. These feelings inhibit their ability to take all the opportunities that America offers. In addition, continuous discussions about the war forced the United States to reckon with the fact that it did not enter the war for moral and just reasons as it always claimed (M.T. Nguyen 2012).



### **Surveillance of Ethnic Media: *Viet Weekly***

It was the summer of 2007. A white pickup circled the buildings of Garden Grove's historic Main Street. As the truck passed by, hundreds of individuals waving South Vietnamese and American flags cheered. The white pickup transported two life-sized mannequins suspended with ropes tied around their necks. One is of the infamous Hồ Chí Minh; his eyes are scratched out, and a long arrow protrudes from the mannequin's stomach. The other one is of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, an air force pilot and the former South Vietnamese vice President who at one point fought against Hồ Chí Minh's troops. His mannequin is dressed in a grey suit to signify the change in his career: war hero turned political traitor for his key role in America's reconciliation with Vietnam (Schou 2007).

Nearly a decade after the Hi-Tek protests, Little Saigon experienced another large-scale anti-Communist demonstration. This time the community gathered to protest *Viet Weekly*, a Vietnamese language newspaper whose publisher and employees have been accused of being communist infiltrators from Viet Nam. This idea is supported by comments from California Assemblyman Văn Thái Trần, who claimed that the FBI had been investigating the communist infiltration of Little Saigon's ethnic media since 2003. Although Tran never mentioned the newspaper by name, *Viet Weekly* was established in 2003 (Schou 2007).

The newspaper was founded by Lê Vũ, who escaped Viet Nam by boat after the war ended (Bharath 2008). His goal was to break "through the anti-communist monopoly on the news in Little Saigon" (Schou, 2007). Out of all other ethnic newspapers, *Viet Weekly*, according to Vũ, was the only one trying to provide voices and perspectives outside of the mainstream. His newspaper published pieces that directly opposed the dominant narrative printed elsewhere (that the United States was not justified for getting involved with the war) and featured counter

opinions like those from ex-Việt Cộng members. As a result, Vũ became the target of the refugee community's rage (Schou 2007).

The first few years of *Viet Weekly*'s run predominantly focused on reporting entertainment news, with the occasional stories of fraud allegations and mistreated restaurant workers. The story that catapulted *Viet Weekly* to infamy in the Vietnamese American community was its coverage of Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez's visit to Hanoi in 2017. During Sanchez's visit, a group of women whose husbands had been arrested for religious activities tried to meet with the Congresswoman at the residence of U.S. Ambassador Michael Marine. The Vietnamese police did not let these women in (Schou 2007). A few days earlier, Vietnamese priest, Father Nguyễn Văn Lý was arrested and sentenced by the Vietnamese government for his crimes against the state. A photograph of Nguyễn Văn Lý being muffled by a guard's hand after he yelled: "Đả Đảo Cộng Sản!" (Down with Communism) spread across the world (Nguyen304 0:53-0:59). All Vietnamese-language newspapers reported on the incident—all except *Viet Weekly*.

Father Nguyễn Văn Lý's trial on March 30, 2007, became a sign of the religious oppression in Viet Nam; those in Little Saigon felt angered that Vũ and *Viet Weekly* did not report the incident. According to Vũ, he believed the situation was more complex than what other newspapers were saying. In his experience interviewing Nguyễn Văn Lý's supporters, Vũ claimed that these supporters did not believe that the priest was being persecuted for his teachings. Instead, they claimed that Nguyễn Văn Lý was arguing with the state over the government's proposal to build an irrigation ditch near his church. From his interviews, Vũ believed that Vietnamese officials were merely trying to stop the leadership at the church from growing enough power to overthrow the government. He did not believe that the Vietnamese

government suppressed common people from practicing their religion as other newspapers reported (Schou, 2007).

Vũ also angered those in Little Saigon approximately one month later when he published two opinion pieces on a Vietnamese-language website. One piece defended the United States entering the war and positioned South Vietnamese soldiers as heroes. The counter piece was written by an ex-Việt Cộng soldier who criticized the United States and even stated that the 9/11 attacks were an appropriate price to pay for their foreign policy. Vũ's refusal to print the infamous picture of Nguyễn Văn Lý and his decision to publish the opinion of a former Việt Cộng soldier around the time of Black April (the two opinion pieces were published by *Viet Weekly* on April 25 and May 4 respectively) resulted in him being targeted by those in Little Saigon (Schou 2007).

The community's protest against Vũ stemmed from the fear that their new country was being taken by the political power that overtook their homeland. In addition, many first-generation Vietnamese American refugees felt like their lived experiences with Communist forces were being overlooked, rewritten, and ignored by the counter-narratives printed in the newspapers. This is supported by the fact that many protestors were first-generation, former military members, and those who had been imprisoned by Communist forces after the Fall of Saigon. Some notable community members who participated include: Phan Nhật Nam, a producer for TV station Saigon Broadcasting Television Network and former South Vietnamese army captain, Trung Nguyễn, who was a member of the Garden Grove school board during that time, and Nguyen Chí Thiên, a poet who stated the Communists imprisoned him for 27 years without a trial (Schou, 2007). The weekly protests of Vũ's newspaper lasted for 11 months

before the scrutiny and protest shifted to another Vietnamese American newspaper (Bharath 2008).

### **Controversial Art: Sacred Flags and Dirty Feet**

As noted above, the *Viet Weekly* protests lasted for about 11 months before another controversy caught the eyes of the community. In 2008, *Người Việt* was Little Saigon's leading newspaper. The newspaper and its editors were active in denouncing Lê Vũ and *Viet Weekly* in 2007. However, after the publication of its 2008 special magazine celebrating the Lunar New Year, the newspaper found itself at odds with the community members.

A crowd of protestors paraded outside the newspaper's office for 8 days, holding signs and calling the newspaper's editors "traitors." Dozens of individuals marched around with signs yelling, "Down with Communists! Down with *Người Việt* Newspaper" (Tran 2008). Soon after the protests, two top editors were replaced in response to the community's pressure. What exactly did these editors do to anger the community? They allowed a photo of a foot-spa tub painted red and yellow to be published in their special Lunar New Year magazine.

According to the artist Chau Huynh, her intention was never to offend the community. She merely wanted to highlight the sacrifices many Vietnamese American women made for their families. It was a means to recognize the labor these women performed in nail salons after coming to the United States (Tran 2008). Though Huynh intended to honor all nail salon workers, like her mother-in-law, many community members reacted negatively to the art. Chau Huynh displayed the foot spa along with seven other pieces that she stated reflected her experience living in Viet Nam and then moving to the United States. Within the magazine, the image was accompanied by a translated note where Huynh explained the artwork.

Still, even with the explanation placed right next to the picture of the foot spa bath, Nguyễn Văn Úc, former military helicopter commander, found the art piece to be highly offensive. Other community members questioned why their beloved flag, which they fought so hard to protect, was painted on an object that people used to wash their dirty feet. Others were angered that the yellow power cord of the machine was plugged into a red outlet, an image that resembles the Communist flag of Viet Nam. To protestors, the actions of Huynh and those working under *Người Việt* signified that they were communist sympathizers (Tran 2008).

Worried and fearful that Little Saigon would soon be overrun by those sympathetic to Viet Nam's Communist regime, especially considering Chau Huynh was a recent arrival from Viet Nam (she had moved to the United States nine years prior to this incident), many first-generation residents came together. They were angered that their flag was painted on something associated with dirty feet, so they protested, just as they had done many times before. Dozens of individuals gathered in front of *Người Việt* and marched in the parking lot, and repeated, "Down with Communists! Down with *Người Việt* newspaper!" (Tran 2008). These individuals protested outside of the office for months. In addition, these protestors verbally harassed and intimidated *Người Việt Daily News* staff members, customers who bought the paper to read, and any stores caught selling the newspaper.

Anh Do, the newspaper's new editor, filed an injunction to protect the newspaper's employees and customers from constant harassment. The Westminster police department even stated *Người Việt*'s employees received bomb threats in addition to being yelled at. According to Do, she and other members of the community were tired of protestors' "name-calling, threats, and intimidation" (Bharath 2008). Though Do acknowledged the importance of a free press, Do stated that the actions of the protestors were "horrific" violations of this freedom (Bharath 2008).

Although the judge denied Do's initial plan of filing a temporary restraining order, they would eventually grant a preliminary injunction request after reading twelve testimonies from those who were intimidated (Bharath and Mickadeit 2008).

Do's decision to file an injunction was a pivotal moment in the community's history. Her decision to address protestors through the legal route is notable as it was one of the first times someone in the community retaliated and legally won against these anti-Communist protests. Although these protests and demonstrations occurred due to the first-generation feeling like their experiences were being forgotten, overlooked, or invalidated, they often suppressed the voices of those who offered differing opinions. When the community shifted its focus to demonstrating against other community members, it was a form of discipline and reinforcement of heteropatriarchy within the community. However, Do's success against these protestors indicated that it is possible to fight back against this disciplining and win.

### **No Room for Discussion: the "F.O.B II: Art Speaks" Exhibit**

In 2009, the art exhibit *F.O.B II: Art Speaks*, hosted by the Vietnamese American Arts & Letters Association (VAALA), was forced to shut down early due to protests from the refugee community in Orange County. Following the protests against *Viet Weekly* in 2007 and *Người Việt* in 2008, the community gathered to oppose the art exhibition a year later. Through various works of art, the exhibit tackled sensitive subjects such as sexuality, imperialism, and refugee histories (Duong and Pelaud, 2012). According to VAALA's website, its values are community, cross-cultural enrichment, communication, collaboration, and partnership (vaala.org). The exhibition was meant to foster communication and counter the silencing that had occurred recently. Even within the title, the phrase "art speaks" evoked the question "who does this art speak for?" Contrary to their goals, the exhibition was forced to close early in an instance of

communal silencing after community members saw Brian Doan’s work. Image 6 depicts his piece for the exhibition. A female, wearing a red tank top with a single yellow star, communist Viet Nam’s official flag, sits and stares tentatively into the distance. On the table next to her rests a bust of the communist leader Hồ Chí Minh (Bharath 2009; Duong and Pelaund, 2012).



(Image 6: “Thu Duc, Viet Nam” (2008) by Brian Doan)

Like all other artworks in the exhibit, the photograph’s purpose was to evoke conversation within the Vietnamese American community (Vu 2022). However, after the publication of a *LA Times* article, in which Brian Doan’s art is highlighted and board members of VAALA were misquoted, those involved with the exhibit found themselves receiving threats and criticism (Tran 2009). As seen in image 7, various community members came out to watch and

protest VAALA’s press conference, where they announced that the exhibition would be closing early. These protestors characterized VAALA as a traitorous Communist group. Two older men are dressed in military uniforms. The man on the left holds a sign that reads:

“Yêu cầu các cơ quan truyền thông, báo chí tẩy chay quốc họp báo của bọn việt gian VAALA hôm nay” (Bharath 2009; text decoded by author and mother)<sup>13</sup>.

“Request that the media stations and magazines not attend the press conference of Viet traitor group: VAALA” (Bharath 2009; translated by author and mother)<sup>14</sup>.



(Image 7: Anti-Communist protestors outside and inside of VAALA’s press conference. PC: Unknown. *OC Register* article “Vietnamese artists’ exhibit shut down by threat of protests” by [Deepa Bharath](#), published on January 16, 2009)

<sup>13</sup> As part of the sign was covered by the metal door, my mother and I decoded the text based on context clues.

<sup>14</sup> Although the poster does use the word “*cộng sản*” to refer to Communist/Communism, the usage of word “*việt gian*” can be understood as these elders calling VAALA Communists.



Though still heavily centered on anti-Communist sentiments, the threats and criticism directed at the exhibit curators were more varied when compared to the previous examples of anti-communist movements in Little Saigon. As those involved were predominantly women, the curators and VAALA members faced gendered and misogynistic comments. As Lan Duong and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud note, they were painted as both “traitorous daughters” of the refugee community and as “*đĩ*” or “whores” (Duong and Pelaud, 2012).

As Thuy Vo Dang notes, for Vietnamese American women, there is a layer of gendered and generational disciplining when engaging in social justice work (Vo Dang et al., 2022). Indeed, as women, the curators Lan Duong and Tram Le and the other VAALA board members had to reckon with gendered base criticism when they put on the exhibition. These organizers were forced to assume a role as “daughters” of the community, a role that traditionally demands silence and deference to elders. As “daughters,” they were expected to protect the homeland and their homes; as such, by speaking out in a way that community elders viewed as “anti-Communist,” they betrayed their community. As those educated in Vietnamese American studies, their credentials were undermined. The curators and VAALA members debated heavily and carefully before they decided to include the piece by Doan. Without letting the artwork be a medium for discussion, these protestors immediately turned against their own community members, creating an even deeper divide.

VAALA’s exhibition was another pivotal moment in Vietnamese American and Little Saigon, Orange County’s history. For many male protestors, the need to reestablish themselves after their loss of status and the displacement they experienced as refugees, resulted in them using gender intimidation to control the members of VAALA. However, the board members of VAALA did not step down from the criticism. The group would go on to host a very successful

Vietnamese Film Festival only a month later that also aimed to evoke conversation. The members of VAALA defiantly went up against the “collective narrativization of Vietnamese America in Southern California” by continuously hosting events that highlight the diversity of experiences within the community (Vo 2020).

The *Người Việt* and *F.O.B II: Art Speaks* protests exemplify that anti-Communist sentiments are deeply ingrained in Little Saigon. Many first-generation refugees organized protests and demonstrations when this sentiment is reignited. However, these two instances are unique. Whereas previous demonstrations (like the Hi-Tek incident) resulted in the complete silencing of certain community members, Anh Do and VAALA stood their ground. Their defiance is indicative of the various transformations occurring in Little Saigon.

### **First-Generation Vietnamese: the Community’s Memorykeepers**

The previous sections of this thesis demonstrate that anti-Communism is deeply embedded in Little Saigon by giving a brief history of various instances where the community gathered to protest perceived Communist threats. According to Karin Aguilar San-Juan, the production and construction of memory for the Vietnamese American community involve creating certain “discourses about the past and integrating them into community building and placemaking efforts” (Aguilar San-Juan 2009). Those who make these discourses and dictate the memories that can be commemorated are these first-generation refugees. The discourses that these leaders ingrained into the community were that refugees needed to continue to fight against Communism as nationalists and protectors of the country. These individuals had lived experiences under the Communist Party of Viet Nam, which made them particularly driven to assert their hatred of Communism (Aguilar San-Juan 2009).

As Phuong Tran Nguyen explains, during the era of Reagan's neoconservative ideologies, the Vietnamese American community was described as the "model minority" for both their economic progress and their willingness to fight against the Communists. During these years, the memories and discourses of the community aligned with the overall goal of Reagan's foreign policies (P.T. Nguyen 2017). However, as time went on, the American public became less sympathetic and expected these refugees to "let go of the past." As Thuy Vo Dang explains, within American society, the narratives around Black April and the war focused on American lives and deaths, while in Viet Nam, the Fall of Saigon (the singular moment where refugees lost their country) was associated with reunification efforts and victory (Vo Dang 2005). Anti-Communism then became a tool for the Vietnamese American community to assert the validity of their experiences in a country and society that was slowly erasing them from the dominant narrative.

By putting up a poster of Ho Chi Minh and asserting that Viet Nam has changed for the better, Trần Văn Trường directly opposed this generation's experience. It is also painful for the first-generation to watch those in their community actively contest their experiences by publishing photos or holding art exhibitions that (in their eyes) celebrate the political regime or political ideology that forced them to leave their homes. In addition, with America now positioning them as "bad refugees" for being unable to let go of the past, the United States invalidated their lived experiences by stating Communism is no longer a threat and that they have no reason to demonstrate against this ideology anymore.

According to Thu Huong Nguyen-Vo, "Vietnamese Americans occupy the position of self-mourners because no one else mourns us" (Nguyen-Vo 2005). This quote can explain why the first-generation continuously protests these perceived Communist parties. As Espiritu notes,

the narratives around the Viet Nam war do not focus on the experiences of refugees; they instead highlight the United States as a morally righteous nation (Espiritu 2014). As these narratives erase the refugee experience, these individuals must mourn and protect themselves by protesting to assert their lived experiences and memories, even if it is against their own community members. However, in 2020, the Vietnamese American community found someone who would “mourn” and fight for them in the form of Donald Trump. Trump positioned himself as an ally of the Vietnamese American community when he stated that he would fight against and beat Joe Biden, who Trump accused of being a Socialist/Communist. By doing so, he quelled the fears that the United States would be taken by the same political power that overtook Viet Nam. The Vietnamese American community, particularly the first-generation, believed that Trump had their best interest in his mind. Trump was an ally to their cause, and therefore they must support him.

As one elderly Westminster resident stated on Facebook<sup>15</sup>:

*“Toàn dân Mỹ và trên toàn thế giới Ủng hộ. Đường lối chính sách. Của TT Trump. PTT Mike Pence. Xóa cộng sản độc tài. Thế giới hòa bình.”* (Post found in group “ỦNG HỘ TT TRUMP XÓA CỘNG SẢN VÀ ĐỘC TÀI”)<sup>16</sup>

“All Americans and citizens of the world support the path and policies of President Trump and Vice President Mike Pence. Erase Communist dictators. The entire world be

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<sup>15</sup> For privacy reasons, I have only named the city this individual lives in. This was posted on December 23, 2020 and received 102 likes, 8 comments, and 6 shares within a week.

<sup>16</sup> I have copied the quote exactly as it was written. The original poster did misspell “đường” and put periods where they are found.

peaceful” (Post found in the Facebook group “ỦNG HỘ TT TRUMP XOÁ CỘNG SẢN VÀ ĐỘC TÀI” quote translated by the author.)<sup>17</sup>

### **Setting the Scene: “Vote For Trump, Not China Joe”**

The previous sections in this thesis have highlighted the prevalence of anti-Communist sentiments within Little Saigon. What is less often discussed is the presence of anti-Chinese attitudes and rhetoric that also permeate the community. The following sections will spotlight and historicize key events that exemplify the antagonistic relationship between Vietnamese and Chinese. Although it is not a complete timeline of the shared history between both groups, it underscores the events that are fixed within Vietnamese American memory.

The August 29, 2020 rally across Asian Garden Mall also saw many Vietnamese Americans holding signs saying, “COMMUNIST CHINA GET OUT OF USA.” One rally attendee was captured chanting the same words as the sign into a microphone. This attendee was met with cheers and chanting, “GET OUT. GET OUT. GET OUT” (TubeAnon 1:50-1:55). Other clips and images from the rally show attendees holding signs associating China with the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the racialized term popularized by Donald Trump, these Vietnamese Americans walked around with signs saying, “DOWN TO CHINA VIRUS.” This hateful rhetoric towards China at the August 29 demonstration is not a singular event. In the various Little Saigon Trump rallies that followed, Vietnamese Americans, predominantly the elderly, were seen holding signs and imitating the same chants discussed above. This repeated occurrence

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<sup>17</sup> TT Trump stands for *tổng thống* Trump or President Trump. PTT Mike Pence stands for *phó tổng thống* or Vice President Mike Pence.

of signage and speech against China indicates the longstanding tumultuous relationship between Viet Nam and China.

Social media, specifically Facebook, is another breeding ground for this rhetoric. Of the Facebook groups mentioned above, “Ủng Hộ TT Trump Xóa Cộng Sản và Độc Tài” (“Support for President Trump to Erase Communism and Dictatorship”) appears to be the most active and popular on the topic of US-China relations. As of February 2022, the group consists of over 18,000 Vietnamese people worldwide. Upon researching the group’s constituents, many hail from Orange County (most predominantly Westminster, Garden Grove, Santa Ana, and Fountain Valley). As the title of the group suggests, members of the group often post videos, essays, and images discussing their belief that Donald Trump has the ability to fight back against communism and China. Unlike the then Presidential candidate Joe Biden who was weak, those in the group praised Donald Trump for being a “strong” man, especially in regards to his comment stating that “China’s going to pay a big price for what they've done to this country” (Griffiths 2020).

While many believe that older first-generation Vietnamese Americans do not know technology and social media, these individuals show their fluency with the platform through their ability to share posts within groups and on their timelines. In addition, many of these individuals share memes or political images with one another. The following two pictures posted by a middle-aged Westminster resident<sup>18</sup> exemplify that first-generation Vietnamese Americans are more fluent with social media than most expect. The first image shows the current President of the People’s Republic of China, Xi Jinping, holding three leashes. Each leash is seen connected

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<sup>18</sup> For privacy purposes, I will only be revealing the city the poster lives in to show that they are an Orange County resident.

to the collars of three different dogs with the smiling heads of then Vice- Presidential and Presidential candidates Kamala Harris and Joe Biden and former President of the United States Barack Obama. Behind Xi Jinping is the Forbidden City, an important symbol of Chinese power and history. In this image, Xi Jinping is positioned as a dominant figure as he is the only human and master of Harris, Biden, and Obama. As the only human, he has the ability to control, lead, and dominate the three “dogs.” In addition, the body of Xi Jinping is muscular and sturdy, further amplifying his strength and dominance. This image indicates the belief that Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, and Barack Obama are weak. Their exaggeratedly smiling faces show their naivety, as if they are unaware of the figure looming and controlling them from behind. Or their smiling faces can also be a sign that they are happy with being influenced by Xi Jinping (and China by extension). From the image, it is apparent that if Biden and Harris were to win the election, the United States would be under the influence and control of China.

The second image shows what would happen if Donald Trump were reelected. In this image, a serious-looking Trump is depicted in control of the triad of “dogs” from before, in addition to Xi Jinping, whose head has also been transplanted onto the body of a dog. Trump is seen wearing a yellow scarf with two stars. One star is the pattern of the flag of the United States, while the other star has the design of the yellow flag with three red stripes, the former flag of South Vietnam. Whereas the previous image showed Xi Jinping in control, Donald Trump is the dominant figure in the second image. He has taken the reins from Xi Jinping, and therefore, he has control over both America and China. His facial expression relays his dominance, power, and the notion that he takes the threat of China seriously. His muscular body is indicative that America needs a strong figure to fight against China. In addition, his expression is contrasted

with Xi Jinping's face, who looks upset that his plan of controlling the United States through Biden and Harris failed. Biden, Harris, and Obama's faces remain smiling, blissfully ignorant.



(Image 8: Photo found on Facebook, creator unknown. Image cropped by author to remove empty white space.)





(Image 9: Photo found on Facebook, creator unknown.)

On a surface level, these two pictures can be read as exemplifying anti-Chinese sentiments. However, the image is more nuanced than that. The dehumanization of Kamala Harris and Barack Obama by depicting them as animals feeds into historic anti-Black stereotypes and racialization. Although the anti-Black sentiments are mediated by the presence of Joe Biden as a dog, it is difficult to argue that this image does not tap into the anti-Blackness of the Vietnamese American community.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For more on the relationship between the Asian and Black communities see “‘At Least You're Not Black’: Asian Americans in U.S. Race Relations” by Elaine H. Kim.

These two images were posted on December 9, 2020. The original poster tagged 28 other people in the post. In a matter of a few days, the post was liked by 97 people and shared by 19 people. Other posts by the same user talking about Donald Trump, China, and Joe Biden had a similar engagement, garnering an average of 100 likes and ten shares per post. The social media posts shared, and the signage held at these political rallies again make evident that Trump gained the support of many Vietnamese Americans due to his positioning as a strong leader that would fight back against China. Though participants of rallies and constituents of Facebook groups varied in age, gender, and generation, the vast majority and vocal were these middle-aged first-generation individuals. Anti-Chinese sentiments, like anti-communist sentiments, are commonly seen in the Vietnamese American community and explain why Trump became such a popular figure with certain segments of the Vietnamese American community. To fully understand the depths of this matter, we must first explore the shared history of the Chinese in Viet Nam.

### **Vietnamese resistance to China's 1000 Years of Domination: Sites of Nationalistic Pride**

The tumultuous relationship between Viet Nam and China dates to over 2000 years ago. Viet Nam and its people have always viewed China as the primary threat to their independence and national identity. Early interaction between the two nations began in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. However, it was not until 111 B.C. that China's Han dynasty successfully expanded South into modern-day North Viet Nam (Duiker 1986). China's conquest of the country would last for over a millennium, which is why there is a common saying that Viet Nam lived under China's oppression for 1000 years.

Viet Nam and its culture were heavily influenced by Chinese rule. However, Vietnamese civilians maintained their pride in their own indigenous culture and resisted Chinese domination multiple times throughout the 1000-years. In 40 A.D., the Trưng sisters, Trưng Trắc and Trưng

Nhị, led a peasant revolt against the Han dynasty to free Viet Nam from China's oppression and exploitation. The two sisters gathered a force of over 80,000 supporters (most of whom were women) and successfully pushed Chinese troops out of the country. Although their reign as Vietnamese queens would be short-lived, as the Han dynasty regained control over Viet Nam three years later, they became notorious figures within Vietnamese history for their accomplishments (unavsa.org).

After 43 A.D., the Vietnamese peasantry would continue to rebel against Chinese oppression but would largely remain unsuccessful until the rise of Triệu Ẩu, or Lady Triệu. By the time she was 19, Triệu Ẩu had begun leading her troops to fight against the Ngô (Wu) dynasty. Like Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị, she wanted to free Viet Nam from Chinese oppression. As legend has it, Triệu Ẩu and her supporters successfully won over 30 battles against the Chinese. However, her small military force would eventually be defeated by the Wu dynasty's large army (unavsa.org). Like the Trưng sisters, Triệu Ẩu is a famous figure of Vietnamese resistance to China's 1000-year conquest of Viet Nam. Their rebellions are indicative of the tumultuous relationship between the two countries. Despite being influenced by Chinese culture, Vietnamese civilians took pride in their own culture and strove to establish their independence.

After a long struggle, Viet Nam would eventually gain its independence from China in 939 A.D. Ngô Quyền is cited as the commander who successfully defeated the Chinese and would establish Viet Nam's first enduring dynasty. Though not entirely peaceful due to border disputes with the Champa and Khmer people, Viet Nam would remain an independent country for half a millennium until China's Ming dynasty successfully invaded and conquered Đại Việt (the name for Viet Nam at the time). The Ming ruled Vietnamese from 1407 to 1427, and under their rule, the Vietnamese economy suffered greatly. Vietnamese textbooks and notes were

burnt, while valuable artifacts like gold, gems, and artwork were stolen and brought to China (Anderson 2020). Vietnamese citizens were once again under the domination of their northern neighbors. In 1428, Lê Lợi, regarded as one of Viet Nam's most celebrated and beloved national heroes, led a resistance against the Ming army and successfully pushed them out of the country. Lê Lợi would go on to establish the Lê dynasty under his new name Lê Thái Tổ (Cima 1987).

Lê Lợi, Lady Triệu, and the Trưng sisters are still regarded as national heroes for their acts of resistance against China's domination of Viet Nam. Those in the diaspora show their nationalistic pride by celebrating these heroes even in the United States. Various groups come together to host events every year honoring these figures of Vietnamese resistance to Chinese rule (Lan 2022). Many Vietnamese veterans (predominantly male) come donned in their old uniforms, while Vietnamese American women in social groups wear áo dài. It is also common to see young children and teens from cultural organizations dressed in traditional Vietnamese costumes partake in the reenactment of Viet Nam's victories over Chinese domination. It is interesting to note that the type of "costume" that each group wore reflects the role each group is expected to have in the community. Donned in military attire, Vietnamese men are positioned as nationalistic protectors of Viet Nam, the United States, and the community. As mentioned before, the áo dài is an important traditional and cultural dress. Though the áo dài is unisex, it is more common to see women wearing it. Vietnamese women are positioned to be the protectors of Vietnamese culture; they are expected to maintain and pass on aspects of traditional Vietnamese customs by inscribing them onto their bodies.<sup>20</sup> Children and teens from cultural organizations

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<sup>20</sup> For more information on the symbolic meaning of the áo dài, refer to the chapter "Pageantry and Nostalgia: Beauty Contests and the Gendered Homeland" in Nhi Lieu's *The American Dream in Vietnamese*.

are representatives of the younger generation. They are expected to learn about this Vietnamese history through their reenactments and continue the legacy of fighting as they come of age.

These events are sites where Vietnamese Americans (predominantly first-generation refugees based on the age demographics of these military groups, women’s social organizations, and other event attendees) can express their pride in the stories of leaders who fought back against Chinese rule. It is also where these mythologies and legends can be passed down to the younger generation with hopes that they too will have this nationalistic pride and continue this legacy of celebration. It is also a reminder of the tumultuous relationship between the two countries that has extended to modern times. Event attendees often express their frustrations against China for dominating and exploiting their land both in the past and present. At an event celebrating the Trung sisters in March of 2022, event attendee Trịnh Thúy Nga was quoted saying:

*“Hôm nay là một ngày thiêng liêng kính nhớ đến tổ tiên cùng các vị anh hùng dựng nước và giữ nước, mình phải có bổn phận gìn giữ và lưu truyền cho thế hệ sau quê hương đất nước do ông cha để lại, không thể để cho độc tài Cộng Sản cướp lấy, hà hiếp dân lành. Cầu mong cho Việt Nam được bình an, no ấm và dân chủ.” (Lan 2022).*

“Today is a sacred today to remember our ancestors and the heroes who protected and built our country; we have the responsibility to preserve and pass onto the next generation the homeland that our forefathers left behind. We cannot let Communist dictators steal and bully peaceful citizens. Pray that Viet Nam may be peaceful, prosperous, and democratic.” (Lan 2022, translated by author).

This quote shows the pride that many Vietnamese feel about their nation as well as an anti-Chinese sentiment. As it will become apparent, these hidden negative feelings towards China can be exploited by various groups and political figures to get the support of Vietnamese Americans.

### **Ho Chi Minh and the CCP: The Infamous Political Alliance**

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), led by Mao Zedong, and the Vietnamese Communist Party, led by Ho Chi Minh, had close ties prior to the Viet Nam War. Though the current Vietnamese government seldomly talks about China's role in the war due to their nationalistic pride (the government would like to believe that they won the war on their own rather than with the help of China and the then Soviet Union), Vietnamese Americans often cite this relationship as another reason to justify their apprehensions and negative opinions towards China (Zhai 2000, Duiker 1986).

As historian Qiang Zhai notes in his book *China & The Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*, Ho Chi Minh went to the Chinese Communists asking for aid in their fight against the French after the CCP came into power in 1949 (2000). According to Zhai, Mao Zedong eagerly helped Vietnamese Communist forces because he wanted "to demonstrate that his formula for a 'people's war' would apply within the pan-Asian Communist movement" (Wilson Center 2001). This was not the first time that Hồ Chí Minh received help from Chinese Communist forces. In 1938, the leader spent a few weeks with Chinese Communist forces, and upon his return, he arranged for the translations of various manuals on guerrilla warfare for Vietnamese forces against France (Duiker 1986).

The CCP became the first country to recognize Hồ Chí Minh's Democratic Republic of Viet Nam (DRV) in 1950. They would later help train Northern Vietnamese military leaders and

give financial support and weapons to both struggles against French and American rule, further cementing the close relationship between China and Viet Nam's infamous Communist leader (Duiker 1986, Zhai 2000).

While both the Soviet Union and the CCP had roles in helping North Viet Nam in their fight against US-supported South Viet Nam, Vietnamese Americans tend to hyperfocus on the role of China in the war rather than the role of the Soviet Union. There are two possible explanations for this. As Zhai notes, Stalin and the Soviet Union predominantly focused on supporting rising Communist parties in Eastern Europe in the 1940s and 1950s. This focus westward left China to support the movements in Southeast Asia (Wilson Center 2001). The CCP admitted that in the 1960s, it spent over \$20 billion and sent 320,000 combat troops to aid North Viet Nam in its war with South Viet Nam and the United States (Washington Post 1989). Furthermore, Vietnamese Americans focused more on China's involvement in the war due to the tumultuous history between the two countries. As many first-generation Vietnamese Americans who escaped Communist rule were from South Viet Nam, their political alignment veered towards the United States. To them, they were nationalists fighting to protect their country from the traitorous Ho Chi Minh, who aligned himself with Viet Nam's historic enemy: China. China's involvement in the war was seen as an extension of its previous pattern of going into Viet Nam to dominate the country. The fixation on China's role in the war and the vocal protests of Vietnamese Americans speak to the underlying anti-Chinese sentiments woven throughout the rhetoric of nationalist pride. By being vocal about their reservations toward China, Vietnamese Americans feel they are continuing their long history of fighting against Chinese domination.

### **“This Land is My Land”: The Spratly and Paracel Islands**

One contemporary issue that has resulted in various protests in Little Saigon is China's claim that they own the Paracel (*Hoàng Sa* in Vietnamese) and the Spratly Islands (*Trường Sa* in Vietnamese). These two archipelagos are at the center of major international territorial disputes. The key players in this dispute are China, Viet Nam, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines. China currently claims it owns the islands. Beijing continues to assert that almost all of the South China Sea (*Biển Đông* in Vietnamese, or East Sea) is its territory. The Vietnamese government and other countries are fighting back against this claim.

Some of the earliest evidence of Vietnamese ownership over the islands is the 1686 document "*Toàn Tập Thiên Nam tứ chí lộ đồ Thư*" (Route Maps from the Capital to the Four Directions) and "The Complete Map of the Unified Đại Nam" dated in 1832. Both maps show the two archipelagos as a unit that belonged to Viet Nam (NBR 2020, Lendon 2020). Viet Nam claims that the two archipelagos remained under their rule even during French colonization. In a 2014 paper, however, China's Foreign Ministry claimed that China had been exploring the South China Sea for over two thousand years, and thus they had ownership over the islands. In addition, some scholars believe that Viet Nam may have legally given up any claims they had to the Paracel islands in 1958 when North Vietnam's Prime Minister wrote a letter and claimed that Hanoi "recognizes and approves" China's claim of sovereignty of the South China Sea and all the territories that fall within the boundaries (Lendon 2020). During that time, South Viet Nam had claims to the islands. Therefore, those who supported the South (as in, those in the United States who left after the Communist take over) do not regard the letter as legitimate and therefore claim that Viet Nam still owns the islands.

In 1974, China and Viet Nam engaged in a brief but bloody battle for the Paracel Islands. Fifty-three South Vietnamese troops were killed trying to protect the archipelago from being



taken by China. Today, this battle is remembered by both Vietnamese living in Viet Nam and Vietnamese Americans as another instance of China's attempt to dominate the country.

Vietnamese Americans in Little Saigon planned a protest in 2007 after China moved to include three islands in the Paracel archipelago as a Chinese county. The rally would later extend to Los Angeles, where 300 Vietnamese Americans stood outside of the Chinese Consulate in LA.

Protestors were seen shouting slogans like "Stop the Chinese Land Grab." Protestors also were seen burning the current Chinese flag (Bharath 2007).



(Image 10: Chua Ngo burns a picture of Ho Chi Minh and the Chinese flag. Image from an article by *OC Register* published on December 19, 2007, by [Deepa Bharath](#). Photographer Unknown)

Image 10 shows protestor Chua Ngo, donned in a military uniform, burning a picture of Hồ Chí Minh and the Chinese flag as two young children watch. The two objects that Chua Ngo chose to burn are interesting because they exemplify Vietnamese American resentments against Ho Chi Minh and highlight the strong anti-Chinese sentiments. The chanting of "Stop the

Chinese Land Grab” once again reiterates Vietnamese (and by extension Vietnamese American) opposition to China as they believe that China is continuing its policy of stealing land and resources from Vietnam, similar to how they did so during the 1000-year domination.

China’s claim to the islands would once again lead to a protest 7 years later when Vietnamese American activists in Little Saigon planned demonstrations in Little Saigon and Los Angeles. Like the protests in 2007, Little Saigon residents drove to the Chinese Consulate in LA and chanted outside the building. Hoàng Trần, an elderly resident of Little Saigon, was quoted saying, “China thinks it can just reach out and grab anything it wants. They are so powerful while Viet Nam is tiny—we must speak up for our rights. What happens if they try to take other land?” (Do 2014). Participants of both protests were predominantly elderly who identified themselves as part of the first generation. Hoàng Trần’s words may sound familiar as they mirror first-generation refugees who still attend the cultural celebrations of Vietnamese national heroes who fought off China. Tran’s emphasis on China taking land is reminiscent of previous arguments of China being a dominating figure who is a threat to Vietnamese independence, and his insistence to “speak up” mirrors acts of resistance to Chinese domination of the past. From this, it is evident that although Vietnamese Americans are no longer citizens of Viet Nam, many still hold onto the nationalistic belief that they need to protect Viet Nam from foreign aggressors. Whereas national heroes like Lê Lợi, Lady Triệu, and the Trung sisters took to fighting wars with China to defend their nation, Vietnamese Americans utilized protests and demonstrations as a means of resistance. The territorial dispute over the Paracel and Spratly islands and the resulting protests in Little Saigon indicate the turbulent relationship between Viet Nam and China. Furthermore, these instances exemplify that anti-Chinese sentiment is an important defining feature for most elderly first-generation Vietnamese Americans. Once again, these

negative feelings towards the Chinese can be exploited by various groups and political figures to get the support of this subgroup of Vietnamese Americans.

### **The Great Chinese Milk Scandal of 2008**

Vietnamese Americans often respond to geopolitical tensions between China and Viet Nam that have nothing to do with war or military aggression. An example of this is their response to the Great Chinese Milk Scandal of 2008. In a report by *Shanghai Daily* on September 9, 2008, it was revealed that 14 infants from China's Gansu province were suffering from kidney stones after they consumed powdered infant milk formula from one brand. Afterward, it was reviewed that over 54,000 babies were sick from consuming this product, and 4 babies had died. This incident sparked global concern about food products made with Chinese milk and Chinese milk powder (CBC News 2008, Gossner et al., 2009). Testing these products revealed that the milk products were contaminated with the industrial chemical melamine. The primary use for the chemical is to help synthesize melamine-formaldehyde resins, a complex polymer found in adhesives, laminated counters and tabletops, and dishwasher safe-tableware. Manufacturers added the chemical into diluted milk products to boost the protein content of the items. Ingestion of the chemical can lead to an increased incidence of kidney stones and renal failure among infants (Gossner et al., 2009).

The global concern over these products resulted in various countries testing and banning products from China that contained melamine. Viet Nam's Ministry of Health found melamine in eighteen food items imported from China and other countries, thus leading to a massive recall of these products. The 2008 Chinese Milk Scandal had lasting impressions on the world as Vietnamese Americans still talk about the issue today. During this time, those in Little Saigon were disgusted and concerned over the scandal, and thus they called for a boycott of Chinese

products. Residents of Little Saigon encouraged fellow residents, family members, and friends not to buy products “Made in China” and instead, they should search for products made in the United States (anecdotal evidence). These impressions of Chinese products (and by extension, Chinese people themselves) as impure, dirty, dangerous, contaminated, and unsafe remain today. This characterization of China would later become heightened with Donald Trump’s racist rhetoric during the COVID-19 pandemic. Referring to the virus as “Kung Flu” or the “Wuhan Virus,” Trump perpetuated the belief that the Chinese (and by extension, all Asians) were contaminated with diseases, dangerous, and dirty. In the context of the Vietnamese American community, Trump’s comments further exploited the beliefs that already existed in the community due to the Great Milk Scandal. As a result, Trump was able to garner the support of many Vietnamese Americans due to their similar perceptions of China and its people.

The demand to boycott Chinese products is easily observed today. On March 24, 2022, a member of the Facebook group “Người Việt Bolsa / Vietnamese in Orange County” posted a picture of the powdered milk brand Ensure. The member warned everyone in the group to be careful when buying the brand as there was a possibility that they would be victims of a scam. “The product may not be from the United States but China and other countries,” the poster stated<sup>21</sup> (translation by author). Although the group member mentioned “other countries,” their decision to only include China by name is evident of Vietnamese Americans’ aversion to products made in China. Whereas previous anti-Chinese sentiments stemmed from the long history of threats (both perceived and actual) of Vietnamese independence at the hands of China, this comment is indicative of the lasting consequences of the milk scandal and a shift in

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<sup>21</sup> For privacy purposes, I will only be revealing that the poster lives in Orange County to show that they are a Little Saigon resident.

perception. While China was still deemed a threat to Vietnamese independence, the country and its people were now characterized as dirty, contaminated, and dangerous.

### **Stop the Infestation: Speak Up For Your Rights!**

As established in previous sections, animosity and suspicion toward China and its people is another thread that runs deep in the Vietnamese American community. The timeline provided does not encompass the entire history between China, Viet Nam, and the people of both countries. Instead, it spotlights and analyzes interactions between the two countries and their people that remain relevant in Vietnamese American memory.

Although Vietnamese Americans no longer live in Viet Nam, many remain motivated to protect their homeland against Communism and its historical enemy and oppressor: China. In her interviews with various first-generation elders in San Diego, Thuy Vo Dang reveals that many Vietnamese Americans express the desire to return to their homeland someday (Vo Dang 2005). For these individuals, they did not leave their country willingly. They express their longing for their homeland and desire to protect it by fighting against the power structures that threaten Viet Nam: Communism and Chinese influence over the country.

The Vietnamese American community is aware that Viet Nam does not have the power or the resources to fight against their larger northern neighbor. For Vietnamese Americans, the only thing they can do from the United States to help the fight is to speak up. This is evident in Hoàng Trần's quote: "China thinks it can just reach out and grab anything it wants. They are so powerful while Viet Nam is tiny—we must speak up for our rights. What happens if they try to take other land?" (Do 2014). However, Trump's self-boasting rhetoric positioned him as someone dominant enough to fight off Chinese influence in the United States, which was attractive to those in Little Saigon. Whereas Joe Biden was perceived as weak, he was presented

as strong. It is because of this rhetoric that Vietnamese Americans rallied to support Trump. To them, Trump was a strong figure who could stop their historic enemy from infesting and encroaching on their current home and past homeland.

This belief that Donald Trump is strong enough to protect the United States from China can be observed in this caption from a first-generation Vietnamese resident of Westminster.

*“Nếu dân nước Mỹ không biểu tình đòi lại quyền lợi cho tổng thống Donald trump thì dân,my bị Đảng Cộng sản Trung Quốc lãnh đạo.joe Biden.obama.china.xi jinping.cod.19.china”* (Caption found in group “ỦNG HỘ TT TRUMP XOÁ CỘNG SẢN VÀ ĐỘC TÀI!”)

“If the American people do not protest and demand the rights back from President Donald Trump, then the people will be led by the Chinese Communist Party. Joe Biden. Obama. China. Xi Jinping. COVID-19. China” (Caption found in group “ỦNG HỘ TT TRUMP XOÁ CỘNG SẢN VÀ ĐỘC TÀI!”; translated by author)<sup>22</sup>

This caption to a photoset exemplifies that many Vietnamese Americans believed that if Trump lost the election, the United States would be under the control of China. Therefore, Vietnamese Americans had to support Donald Trump because he was strong enough to fight off China’s power. Although his policies did not have their greater interest in mind, Vietnamese Americans were willing to overlook this, because Trump was an ally in their fight against Communism and their historical enemy, China.

### **Communal Silencing: The case of Ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese**

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<sup>22</sup> This comment was made on December 28, 2020. The original poster tagged 45 other people in the group to spread their message.

The previous sections highlight the presence of anti-Chinese sentiment within the Vietnamese American community, especially among the first generation. What is perhaps ironic, then, is that these sentiments remain so thoroughly ingrained into the community despite the large number of ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese living in Orange County and the nearby Los Angeles county. Over the years, various scholars have attempted to study and write about this population of ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese (Yu and Liu 1986; Haines 1985; Hung 1985, Espiritu 1989). Monica M. Trieu's monograph is perhaps the most comprehensive as she provides the historical background of their journey from China to Viet Nam to the United States. The monograph also details identity construction and ponders over the question of what it means to be an ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese. Whether intentional or not, the apparent anti-Chinese sentiment within the Vietnamese American community silences the voices of ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese. Dubbed as "twice minorities" by Yen Le Espiritu, these individuals face ostracization as Asians in the United States and as an ethnic minority in Viet Nam and Vietnamese communities in America (Espiritu 1989).

Duiker and Trieu note that the relationship between the ethnic Chinese in Viet Nam first occurred during the Han dynasty under China's 1000-year domination of the county (Duiker 1986; Trieu 2009). The period when Viet Nam was a province of China was the beginning of multiple large waves of Chinese migration into the country. Trieu also notes French officials welcomed and encouraged Chinese economic development in Viet Nam during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thus leading to even greater migration of ethnic Chinese to the Southern part of Viet Nam. (Trieu 2009). This indicates that ethnic Chinese have lived in Viet Nam for centuries. Over time, many of these individuals adopted Vietnamese names and acculturated themselves into society. However, despite being an ethnic minority in Viet Nam, Chinese Vietnamese held economic

dominance over many Vietnamese, especially in the business sector. This is possibly one reason anti-Chinese sentiments remain in the Vietnamese American community despite there being a significant ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese population. Even though these individuals settled in Viet Nam for decades or centuries, their prevalence and success in the business sector were seen by proxy as an extension of China's many attempts to dominate Vietnamese culture, land, economy, and people.

The decades leading up to and after the Viet Nam war saw many changes for the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, with the Diem regime's attempt to homogenize the country by declaring that all Chinese born in Viet Nam as Vietnamese citizens (Pan 1999). The Diem regime implemented new laws that impacted the businesses of those who did not apply for Vietnamese citizenship. Contrary to the Diem Regime following the war, ethnic Chinese Vietnamese found themselves targeted by the Communist's anti-Chinese and anti-capitalist policies, such as currency and land reforms. The unstable relationship between China and Viet Nam and the anti-Communist regime would lead to many ethnic Chinese Vietnamese fleeing the country beginning in 1978 (Trieu 2009). Monica Trieu also notes that the majority of ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese arrived in the United States earlier than the Vietnamese, with a little less than 50% of the current Chinese-Vietnamese coming by 1981. The Vietnamese would not reach this point until 1989 (Trieu 2009). This leads to another possible point of contention: the fact that the majority of Chinese-Vietnamese arrived in the United States before the ethnic Vietnamese. Though Chinese-Vietnamese were technically being evicted out of Viet Nam, their majority status as business owners made it slightly easier for them to flee. That is, the Vietnamese government benefited from the gold that Chinese-Vietnamese paid as an exit fee out of Viet Nam (Gold 1994). Though the journey to the United States was dangerous, paying an exit fee legally



allowed them to leave, whereas ethnic Vietnamese would be captured and thrown into prison if they were caught trying to escape.

Upon their arrival in the United States, Chinese-Vietnamese and Vietnamese refugees shared similar experiences of being placed in one of four resettlement camps. Trieu does highlight, however, that secondary migration has led a greater number of ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese to live in Los Angeles county, where several Chinese ethnic enclaves already existed, rather than in Orange County. The presence of these established communities greatly helped ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese adapt as they tried to get used to their new home. Their ability to speak Chinese meant that they could interact and, most importantly, get resources from these communities. The most prominent example of this is Frank Jao, the “godfather” of Little Saigon. (Lee 2007). Jao is an ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese entrepreneur who was born in Hải Phòng, Viet Nam. His cultural knowledge of Viet Nam meant that he understood the businesses he needed to open to cater to a Vietnamese audience. His ability to speak Chinese made it possible for him to connect with a Chinese investor in Indonesia; with the investor’s help, Jao bought a 21,000 square foot retail center on Bolsa street in 1979. By 2007, Jao and his firm had built over two dozen more shopping centers in Little Saigon (Lee 2007). Although Little Saigon’s success can be partially attributed to Jao and his resourcefulness, his ethnicity as a Chinese man is another point of contention. As an ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese in Viet Nam, Jao and others had previous experience being entrepreneurs, which helped them when they arrived in the United States. In addition, their ability to speak multiple languages allowed them to gather resources from ethnic communities already established. Jao’s dominance over the refugee economy as ethnically Chinese was seen, once again, as a proxy for one of China’s many attempts to control Vietnamese spaces, places, and people.

In the case of Frank Jao, despite his contributions to the development of Little Saigon, he still experienced pushback from the community whenever they deemed his ideas “too Chinese” even though he is a Chinese-Vietnamese man (Lee 2007). The pushback he and other Chinese-Vietnamese experienced could be viewed as a form of silencing from the Vietnamese American community as any form of expression of Chinese ethnicity was looked down upon and contested. This silencing has left many ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese confused and anxious about their identities. Many of those interviewed by Monica Trieu expressed feeling as though they did not belong to the Chinese or Vietnamese community (Trieu 2009). Despite their full immersion into Vietnamese culture, these individuals felt excluded from Little Saigon because of the community’s pushback to anything related to China and the lack of acknowledgment that ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese exist. These actions indicate that the community in Little Saigon would like to be perceived as wholly ethnically Vietnamese, despite the significant presence of Chinese-Vietnamese living in Orange County and the nearby Los Angeles county.

These historical and more modern reminders of China and their previous attempts to take over Vietnam possibly explain the prominent anti-Chinese sentiments in the community, despite the population of ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese that live in Orange County. It also indicates that the community values one’s ethnicity over nationality. This is evident in the community’s support for political figures that perpetuate racist ideologies about the Chinese without acknowledging how their support silences and shames ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese living in their community. Ultimately, these reasonings are not meant to justify these sentiments. Instead, they offer possible explanations for why these sentiments are so prominent. Furthermore, they exemplify that this situation is incredibly nuanced and complicated.

**Within Our Past, I See the Future: Shifting Times and Transformations**

Anti-Communist and anti-Chinese sentiments are two ideologies that are commonly associated with the Vietnamese American community. This project has provided a history of various moments when the community acted upon these beliefs. Though there have been more demonstrations against Communist and Chinese anxieties, the ones mentioned in this project are those that were covered by the media and those that are still discussed today. Like how these sentiments recycled themselves into these issues and how they will inevitably find their way into future conflicts, the first generation will continue to protest, gather, and chant in support of those who share the same ideologies or against those who offer differing opinions. In addition to these physical demonstrations, in recent times, various social media platforms have become prominent spaces for protest as information and ideas can spread quickly and reach a broad audience<sup>23</sup>. These virtual communities imitate those social groups created by refugees during their early stages of settlement in the United States, with the purpose of pooling resources for community survival (Kibria 1990 and Kibria 1994).

Anna Vu links the older first-generation's need to commemorate the past with the prevalent sense of injustice and pain from their experiences in Viet Nam and the diaspora (Vu 2022). The construction of memory is both a social and spatial practice initially controlled by the older first-generation, but as Vu notes, the need to commemorate and honor this memory may not resonate as strongly and in the same way with the growing population of second and third-generation Vietnamese (Aguilar-San Juan 2009; Vu 2022). Though the latter generations may understand the reasoning behind the attitudes of their elders, they are more connected to these social issues like combating racism and injustice and, therefore, may clash with the first-

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<sup>23</sup> For more information about the history of Vietnamese American usage of social media, see Caroline Kieu-Linh Valverde's chapter "Social Transformations from Virtual Communities" in her monograph *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora*.

generation (Vu 2022). This is evident in various instances, such as the *FOB II: Art Speaks* exhibition, where the curators and VAALA wanted to evoke conversation about the Vietnamese experience but were chastised for betraying their community. In addition, this clash is observed in the recent election, when the second and third-generation utilized social media to try to educate and negotiate with their elders, only to be ignored or once again chastised for not supporting the candidate that “had the community’s best interest in mind” (anecdotal evidence).

The majority of first-generation Vietnamese Americans are getting older. Their children and grandchildren are moving away from Little Saigon; they feel as though their voices are slowly being drowned out, and the memories of their experiences are being forgotten. This results in their constant assertion that the past must be celebrated and passed on to the younger generations. To call back the words of event attendee Trinh Thúy Nga: “*mình phải có bổn phận gìn giữ và lưu truyền cho thế hệ sau quê hương đất nước do ông cha để lại.*” Or “we have the responsibility to preserve and pass onto the next generation the homeland that our forefathers left behind” (Lan 2022, translated by author).

Despite his harmful ideologies and rhetoric, Donald Trump exploited the refugee first-generation’s fear to his advantage. Trump’s positioning of Joe Biden as a “socialist” in conjunction with his anti-Communist foreign policies reignited the flames of these anti-Communist sentiments. His foreign policies positioned him as an ally to the first generation and validated both these deeply rooted sentiments and their efforts to expel Communists from the United States. In addition, this select group also rewarded Trump with their support when he proclaimed himself as a strong man that could stand up to China. This once again speaks to the internal anti-Chinese sentiment within the community. Trump was seen as an ally in their fight

against their historical enemy, who was attempting to infringe on the country they left behind and the country where they were rebuilding their lives.

It is important to note that while this project is focused on explaining the attitudes of elderly first-generation Vietnamese Americans, not everyone that identifies as first-generation shares these beliefs. Likewise, although the second and third generations are thought to be more progressive, some individuals align themselves with these anti-Communist and anti-Chinese sentiments and therefore voted for Donald Trump.

This thesis project follows other second-generation Vietnamese Americans who were perplexed by the community's support for Donald Trump in the 2020 elections despite his anti-immigrant and racist stance (T. Nguyen 2020; Dao 2020). The cumulation of many months of research has led me to this project. I come out of it with more empathy towards my elders who have lost so much on their journey to the United States and feel pain as their memories and lived experiences are forgotten, overlooked, and misunderstood.

As we move beyond Trump's administration, many wonder about the lasting impact of his candidacy on the Vietnamese American community. Much like other conservative groups, many participants in these pro-Trump Facebook groups express their wishes that Trump will return. As the 2024 Election approaches, they eagerly await the announcement that he will run for Presidency once again. Does this mean the events surrounding the 2020 Election will repeat themselves? I am hesitant to make any conclusions. However, it is impossible for the community to remain stagnant in its beliefs. With transnational capital funding various projects in Little Saigon, the arrival of new Vietnamese who do not share the same anti-Communist stance as those before them, and the presence of progressive political organizations like PIVOT and VietRise, we have now reached a moment where Little Saigon is at a tipping point. Whether the

pendulum swings back towards ideologies popular and associated with the past or towards transformations based on ideologies burgeoning in the present, I cannot say. However, as a community member in Little Saigon, I await this outcome with cautious curiosity, apprehension, and anticipation.

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