

Living in Two Cultures



ANDREW LAM

Andrew Lam is a California-based journalist, short story writer, and National Public Radio commentator. In this interview, he shares his thoughts on Vietnam and America.

How did you come to the U.S.?

I left Vietnam on April 28, 1975, two days before communist tanks rolled into Saigon. My family and I were airlifted in a C-130 cargo plane out of Tan Son Nhut airport and a few hours before Vietcong shells bombarded the runway and effectively stopped all other flights from taking off. My father was an officer in the South Vietnamese government and he got us passage out of the country....

I remembered spending a few hours at Clark Air Base in the Philippines, wondering what had just happened....I was 11 years old. My family and I spent three weeks in Guam and then we went on to spend another week in Camp Pendleton in Southern California. It was freezing there. I had never been out of Vietnam before, and it being a tropical country, well, I was not used to the weather, to say the least....

What was it like for Vietnamese in America when you came?

There were no Vietnamese in San Francisco to speak of when I came here in 1975. There was my aunt's family and five other families, and there were diplomats or foreign students who remained in the U.S.. That's how small the Vietnamese community was here. In school, kids always asked whether I had killed anybody in Vietnam or had seen dead bodies and helicopters being blown up....

But after a few years, I fit in so well with my American life that I stopped telling my stories. I stopped speaking Vietnamese altogether. Not until college, not until I started dreaming about Vietnam and my childhood again, not until I wanted to become a writer that words came back, language came back, dreams came back, Vietnam came back....



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America, too, has changed dramatically. Years ago, for instance, it was impossible to find fish sauce, the prime element of Vietnamese cooking. Now you can go to Safeway and get it. Vietnamese and other Asian populations in California have indelibly changed its cultural landscape. America is more accepting of Asian cultures than ever before....

As a journalist, what is your perspective on Vietnamese-American community issues?

There are several issues that the community is struggling with. There's the language problem. The older generation speaks Vietnamese and the younger English. This is particularly problematic when a person from the older generation speaks no English and the younger person speaks no Vietnamese. How can you communicate? Many books written by Vietnamese in the United States are written in Vietnamese, but a generation of Vietnamese born in the United States can not access them.



Many turn to libraries as a way to find out about their own history. But books in libraries don't address the South Vietnamese experience. The South Vietnamese are losers in history and very little is devoted to their plight. North Vietnamese have the upper hand. Hanoi rewrites history and that history is now being accessed in the U.S.

I met several Vietnamese American kids who asked me to tell them how they got here. "Don't your parents tell you?" I said. And they said: "No. All they said is that we lost a war and that's why we're here. I want to know more." The responsibility of the older generation is to translate or have their works and testimonies, i.e.. life in re-education camps, boat peoples' experiences, adjustment to American life -- translated so that it's accessible to the new generation....

What are some of the areas of difference between Vietnamese and American cultures?

I think Americans are fond of saying "I love you." Vietnamese are not. Vietnamese don't share words of affections very easily. In fact, it was unusual to see in *Daughter from Danang* the mother being overly affectionate and saying "I love you" repeatedly. My mother who loves me dearly never says "I love you" in such a way.

It's more typical for Vietnamese to demonstrate affections through gestures. When I went home to visit my parents, my mother would fry a fish as it's my favorite dish. And to show her I love her I would have to eat the whole fish. When I won a journalism award a few years ago, my father was very proud. But he couldn't find the words in Vietnamese to say this so finally he...said in English: "I'm very proud of you, son." It was the first time I heard him saying something like this and it was in English. In some way, English is used when Vietnamese words fail us. And they tend to be words like proud or love. Many American-born Vietnamese have complained to me that their parents don't love them. "They never say 'I love you' to me," they'd say. But they don't understand: it's not the standard practice in Vietnam. You have to read affection through gestures and actions.

When I first came to the United States, I also failed to look at teachers in the eyes. In Vietnam it's a sign of disrespect when you look at someone in the eyes. In the United States you are shifty if you don't look at people in the eyes. Even now I tend to shift my focus when I look at someone too long in the eyes. I feel as if I am invading their privacy. Strange but true.

What cultural differences have caused the most difficulty for Vietnamese immigrants to the U.S.?

Vietnamese culture puts a strong emphasis on being part of the *We*. Your individualism is below the need of the many. This is how families survived traditionally. Children are duty-bound to take care of their families. When I went to school at Berkeley, more than half of the Vietnamese student population majored in computer science and electrical engineering. Many told me they didn't want to...A few wanted to be artists or architects and so on, but their parents were poor or were still in Vietnam. They needed to find a solid footing in America in order to help out the rest of the family.

America, on the other hand, tells you to look out for *number 1*. It tells you to follow your dream, to have individual ambition. Take care of yourself first. Go on a quest. The Vietnamese American conflict is one where he has to negotiate between his own needs and dreams with that of his family....In some way, for Asian immigrants, to learn to negotiate between the I and the We is the most important lesson to learn, a skill much needed in order to appease to both cultures.

Is it true that one of the areas of cultural divergence is the relationship with authorities such as police?

Yes, that's true. The problem is that in Vietnam you cannot trust the authorities. In dictatorial countries, there's no good news when the police come calling. You function best when the authorities leave you alone. And worse, in poor countries like Vietnam, petty corruption is a daily event. A cop might stop you and say that you have violated some traffic law. What he means is: "Give me five dollars for breakfast and I'll let you go." The idea that the authorities are on your side is such a novelty that it does not occur to the newly arrived refugee or immigrant to the United States. If you call the police they might arrest you instead of the criminal. There's always a risk as everything could be deemed illegal in Vietnam (and nothing is). Everything can be settled with grease money....

Also, many Vietnamese are afraid to fill out forms, census or otherwise. They have this fear that the government will know everything about them and will use the information against them. And even in the United States, given the post 9/11 scenario, there is some valid justification for that fear.

Another is in the difference in health and mental health issues?

There's a big difference. You must understand that traditional Vietnamese are Confucian bound. We worship ancestors. We light incense and pray to Grandpas and Grandmas long dead. That is to say, we talk to ghosts. Once I worked as an interpreter and there was a case where a Vietnamese woman was suffering from depression and told the psychologist that she kept seeing her dead husband. He thought she was having some kind of disorder. But I told him it's actually typical.... Practically all old people talk like that lady. It was a way for her to say she mourns her losses....

Had the U.S. prepared at all for addressing any "culture shock" that the airlifted Vietnamese children might have experienced?

I think there was an assumption on the part of the Americans who wanted to adopt those Vietnamese children.

That they will **assimilate** and become Americans. That they will forget Vietnam.

That their personal history is not as important as the new reality in which they

found themselves. What they were not prepared for is the hunger of memories. Many of those babies may adjust well to America as adults

assimilate - to absorb and internalize; to accept another culture or set of beliefs as your own

but they also long for their Vietnamese past. They want to know where they come from, who are their relatives, and how can they learn to connect to that past....It's an inevitable human impulse.

In the film, Heidi rejects her brother's request for financial help. Is Heidi's response personal or cultural?

It's expected of you to help your family out, no matter what culture you're from. In the Vietnamese case, it's even more so considering that those who left for the U.S. are in general far more wealthy than those they left behind. An average income in Vietnam is around 400 dollars a year....Many Vietnamese living overseas become an **anchor person** -- someone who will help the rest back home when they make it abroad.

Heidi doesn't understand that tradition or that kind of arrangement at all, having been raised in an American family. And her Vietnamese family didn't understand that she barely knew them. That, in essence, she was a stranger, not someone who was raised by them and shared their belief system. But I think Heidi was also overwhelmed by the needs of her family and though she didn't say it, she herself is not wealthy, or so that was my impression when I watched that movie. She held on to her fantasy of being reunited with her original family without being open to the possibility that it's not all rosy, that they have fantasies of their own.

Heidi did not experience much family closeness growing up. In Vietnam, she was amazed at the love & unity in the family there. What are the ties that bind a Vietnamese family?

Love and a shared belief system and in many ways poverty. You don't leave at 18 just because you reach 18. You live with your family until you're married and even then you might not have enough money to buy a house for yourself and your spouse. So you create a three-generational family and to do so you must learn to suppress your individualism.

You cannot get everything you want because you have to share resources to survive. You learn to live well together and you learn to suppress your own desire. You learn to sacrifice a lot to live in harmony with a large family. But in return, what you get is a kind of insularity that many Americans don't have. You know you'll never be alone. You know that you will be taken care of no matter what. You make that kind of promise to each other. You make that kind of

promise to your ancestors' spirit. When you break away from all that, you are seen as selfish or unfilial, and of course, anti-Confucian.

Is it true that opening a gift in front of the giver is considered rude in Vietnam? Does this explain Kim & Vinh's awkwardness in the film about Heidi's gifts?

...it's true, traditionally you don't open it in front of the person who gives it to you, though you can ask for permission to open it...

Toward the end of her stay in Danang, Heidi says, "this is not what I had pictured." Was there a way to prepare her for her experience?

Hers is not a typical Vietnamese reaction. Vietnamese Americans gossip among themselves and prepare each other for the "shock" of returning. The heat, the mosquitoes, the smell, the needy relatives. You come back with a certain level of cynicism built in. But Heidi, being so disconnected from the community experience, did not have any of that. I think Tran Tuong Nhu, the journalist and interpreter, should have prepared her for it instead of just teaching her "I love you" in Vietnamese. Nhu should have been more savvy as to what happens to the naive returnees.

Do you think Vietnamese Americans might have a different response to the film than non-Vietnamese Americans?

I can't say for sure. In some ways Heidi is a non-Vietnamese American with a Vietnamese American dream. Non-Vietnamese Americans can watch her experience unfold and say: yup, I would feel that way too if I were her. I would feel overwhelmed. I would probably run out and look for a McDonald's and get away from the heat.

But a Vietnamese American who watches the film might say she should have known better. She should have prepared herself. Poor naive woman. What do you expect when you go to a Third World country that is yearning for a better life? Of course, they would have seen you as a life saver in the middle of a turbulent sea. Between Heidi and her birth family is a gap and it needs to be filled with stories: stories that Heidi needs to tell and stories that her mother and sisters and brother need to tell. They need to bridge that gap before they can make familial demands on one another.