

## **Vietnamese American Identity: To Be or Not To Be**

By: Dennis Nguyen

Like any other ethnic group in the United States, Vietnamese Americans are a heterogeneous group. They have divergent histories, experiences, cultures, religions, class backgrounds, and degrees of assimilation and acculturation into American mainstream culture and society. These complex dimensions influence Vietnamese American identity and identities. Identity and identities are flexible and constantly altered and formed due to the ascendancy of histories, experiences, social institutions, material conditions, social relationships and interactions under various circumstances and environments. In this paper, I wish to demonstrate how Vietnamese American identity and identities are constantly evolving through family, religious, and academic institutions. Regardless of whether these social institutions reinforce or decrease one's sense of "Vietnameseness," I argue that these evolving identities are still legitimate as a Vietnamese American identity or identities because they are products of being ethnically Vietnamese living in the United States.

The family institution is considered as an essential source of life and identity for many Vietnamese Americans. According to Zhou and Bankston (1998), the Vietnamese family is "the strongest motivating force in life, stronger than religion and nationally" (p. 83). Vietnamese family structure is rooted from 1,000 years of Confucian influence during the Chinese domination over the Vietnamese. Confucius' philosophy requires a:

Communal salvation and emphasizes ancestor worship, respect for authority, the belief in consensus, a willingness to put society's or the family's interests before individual interest, a high regard for education as a means of mobility, clear rules of conduct, and

constant self-cultivation, and the importance of face-saving” (Zhou and Bankston, 1998, pp. 83-84).

It is a collective system that emphasizes everything an individual must be for the interests of the family and society. However, this traditional system is crashing and transforming for Vietnamese Americans. The reasons for these changes are because of their refugee experiences, resettlement adjustments, new economic opportunities, and American values. An illustration of how traditional Vietnamese family structure and values are modified in contemporary American society is the changing family dynamic in the movie *First Morning*. Directed by Victor Vu (2003), *First Morning*, portrays a typical second wave Vietnamese refugee family’s histories, backgrounds, and experiences. The family was fragmented due to their separated escapes from Vietnam. The father and son had successfully escaped Vietnam and resettled in Houston, Texas. The father soon developed a relationship with another Vietnamese woman there. After hearing news of her husband and son had made it to America, the mother made an escape with her daughter and brother as well. During their boat journey, however, the daughter, Linh, was raped by Thai pirates. This experience traumatized her and she suffered depression and felt withdrawn from her family and society. The family was reunited after the father and son had made their secondary migration from Houston to Little Saigon in Southern California, but Linh’s experience during their escape made it difficult for the family to readjust smoothly into American society. In this film, Linh is portrayed as the “black sheep” of the family. She refuses to carry out her parents’ wish by not getting into a relationship that was arranged for her. Moreover, Linh participates in the nightclub scenes, which is stigmatized in the Vietnamese community. Her actions violate the Confucian values of obedience, respect for parents, and willingness to put her family’s interests before her own. In this movie, Linh is challenging and negotiating the

traditional Vietnamese family values as the roles of a daughter. Even though Linh's parents tried to reinforce her role as a traditional Vietnamese daughter by reproducing the Vietnamese cultural and gendered identity, her "Vietnameseness," Linh is confronting and conciliating these traditional values. The Confucian philosophy of patriarchal social structures and norms are being contested and negotiated by Linh. Hence, Linh is modifying her identity within the family dynamic, which is a legitimated Vietnamese American identity. The roles and characters in this movie reflect the experiences of many other Vietnamese American families.

Religious institutions and participation is another realm where identity or identities could emerge and transform. Zhou and Bankstan (1998) argue that it is a "primary mechanism for integrating young people into community's system of ethnic relations" (p. 99) and that participation in these "ethnic religious institutions can strengthen ethnic identification while also reaffirming ethnic affiliation" (p. 99). Religious institutions serve more than just religious purposes for ethnic communities in the United States. Many Vietnamese American religious institutions offer courses that teach young people Vietnamese language, culture, history, rituals and practices, etc. In this regard, these institutions serve as a base to retain and reinforce Vietnamese traditions and values while at the same time serve agencies for community members. Here, I wish to use my own experience with a Vietnamese American Buddhist Association in Hayward, California to prove that my sense of being a Vietnamese American had gradually changed because of my involvements with this institution. I went to temple and practiced Buddhism as an adolescent. In the beginning, the temple and association did not serve me much value except for networking. I had just come from Vietnam and went to school there, so I outperformed the staff and children in the courses offered at temple. At this point, several other newly arrived children from Vietnam and I were considered as the more "authentic" Vietnamese

by the staff and native born children. We knew the language very well, and knew more about Vietnamese culture and traditions than most young folks in the association. In a sense, our “Vietnameseness” was stronger than theirs. However, over time, I lost interest in the association due to internal politics. I slowly stopped participating and eventually stopped going to temple. The temple and association had weakened my religious participation, ethnic identification, and ethnic affiliation. After I had left the temple and association, I also stopped getting involved in any ethnic-specific, in my case, Vietnamese American, community organizations. However, this does not mean that I’m not a Vietnamese American; it just means my identity as a Vietnamese American has changed and transformed.

Like religious institutions, academic institutions are other social institutions where identity and identities could converge or diverge. Academic institutions provide students with opportunities to strengthen or weaken their ethnic identification and ethnic affiliation. For instance, many Vietnamese American students join Vietnamese Student Association (VSA) to reinforce their Vietnamese identification and reaffirm their Vietnamese ethnic affiliation. For the students who were raised in the suburbs and had little exposure to Vietnamese community and culture, VSA offers them a space to strengthen their ethnic identity and membership. VSA offers “cultural events” and community involvements. This can form one’s ethnic identity for students who had minimal knowledge of Vietnamese culture and community. On the contrast, VSA can also weaken one’s ethnic affiliation and ethnic identity. For example, for the students who grew up in Vietnamese American ethnic enclaves, they have already been exposed to Vietnamese community and culture. As a result, joining VSA does not offer them much expect for networking. These students may be very critical of what VSA does because they may feel it is a watered-down Vietnamese organization. To illustrate, they may think that performing hip hop

dances during a VSA's cultural show is not an appropriate representation of the Vietnamese culture, so they may not want to be involved with VSA. Therefore, they may join other non-Vietnamese student groups or coalitions such as Southeast Asian American, Asian American, or a multi-racial, which then could create a new sense of identity for them. Nevertheless, regardless of whether they think VSA is or is not a culturally Vietnamese organization, the degrees of their differences in term of ethnic identification are the products of being ethnically Vietnamese in the United States.

I have illustrated how Vietnamese American identity and identities are constantly developing through family, religious, and academic institutions. Whether or not these social institutions amplify or undermine an individual's sense of Vietnameseeness, I have argued that these evolving identities are nonetheless authentic identity or identities because they are the results of being an ethnic Vietnamese in America. What it means to be Vietnamese American has different meanings to different people, whether they are Vietnamese or not. Identity and identities are continually changing and expanding because the world keeps changing and different dimensions intersect with each other to create identity and identities. People have divergent histories and experiences, material conditions, and social relationships. These are all factors that influence identity formations and developments. Hence, to conclude, being a Vietnamese American means having a complex and flexible identity and identities.

### References

- Zhou, M., & Bankston, C.L. (1998). *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapted to Life in the United State*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Vu, V. (Producer), & Vu, V. (Director). (2003). *First Morning* [DVD]. United States: Illuminare Entertainment.