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## The role of culture in the social integration of Vietnamese refugees in the United States (1975-2000): An oral history analysis

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### ABSTRACT

*Culture plays an important role in shaping the perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of refugees as they navigate decisions and actions in a new society. Based on an analysis of 88 oral history interviews conducted by the Vietnamese American Heritage Foundation (VAHF) with Vietnamese refugees in the US after the war, this paper examines the relationship between culture and social integration, particularly the cultural values that Vietnamese refugees have chosen and promoted to help them adapt quickly and successfully in the new society. Using a thematic analysis method, cultural values such as self-effort, a studious tradition, sacrifice, and intergenerational responsibility help Vietnamese refugees improve their socio-economic status after a period of settlement in the U.S. The stories specifically illustrate how Vietnamese people have applied cultural values to social integration strategies, establishing connections between culture and economic opportunities within the socio-economic conditions of the United States.*

**Keywords:** *cultural values, education, economic progress, social integration, Vietnamese American*

### 1. Introduction

Migration is a prevalent phenomenon in contemporary world history, driven by factors such as political instability, war, terrorism, and economic conditions. Research on immigrants' social integration with the host country is of interest not only to researchers but also to governments and policymakers. Various aspects of social integration are taken into account, including native language proficiency, access to essential social services,

social security, citizenship, employment opportunities, occupational and income levels, social mobility, as well as acculturation and assimilation among immigrants. There are two approaches to studying the social integration of immigrants: the top-down approach and the bottom-up approach. Top-down approaches often focus on the impact of government and local socio-economic support policies to facilitate easy access for immigrants to social services, education, health and career opportunities. A bottom-up approach that delves into the advocacy efforts of immigrant community elites and the struggles and social engagements of immigrants themselves for civic rights, their economic and social security.

In the field of social history, the bottom-up approach is often complemented by the use of oral history as a significant method and a source of historical data. This method plays a crucial role in capturing the life histories and perspectives of marginalized individuals who may not have been represented in traditional textual historical sources. When studying migration, oral history provides valuable insights into how migrants utilize their resources and social capital to integrate into a new society. Winternitz (1984) found that the histories of modern nations, such as Australia a country that experienced a significant influx of migration in the twentieth century, would not be fully reflected without incorporating the accounts and perspectives of migrants, the historical record would be incomplete and fail to reflect the diverse experiences that have shaped the nation. Therefore, the implementation of oral history projects is not only important for migration history but also for the broader understanding of national history (Winternitz, 1984). Thomson (1999) found that migration has emerged as a prominent subject in international history conferences, particularly in countries like the UK, Australia, and the US, during the latter decades of the twentieth century. According to him, the need for information from migrants' own accounts stems from the fact that the predominant focus of migration history on policies directed towards migrants and the attitudes of indigenous populations towards migrants. The experiences of migrants themselves, as well as their impact on the socio-economic aspects of the host society, have often been reduced to simple statistics, limited to arrival and departure record. Different types of historical sources provide varying insights into the phenomenon of migration. Official records, for example, shed light on the formulation and implementation of migration policies, as well as the controversies surrounding migration and ethnic issues. Statistical sources, on the other hand, reveal migration patterns, settlement trends, employment dynamics, and overall well-being of migrants. But narrative sources, such as oral history, is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of migration in reality. Combining these sources, historians can gain deeper insights into the actual processes of settlement, the challenges faced by migrants, and the ways in which migration policies and patterns have influenced their lives. Additionally, these narratives provide valuable information about the relationships between individuals, families, and different migrant communities, highlighting the social dynamics that emerge in the context of migration (Thomson, 1999).

In the book *"Migration and Identity"* edited by Benmayor and Skotnes (2017), a collection of essays explores the complex relationship between migration and the process of individual and collective re-identification. The book examines this phenomenon during a period marked by significant global migration and escalating conflicts related to nationality, ethnicity, and race. It delves into the intricate dynamics of migration and the reconstruction of social identities, with a particular emphasis on the role of memory and myth in understanding migration processes, especially in terms of the transmission of memories and stories across generations. Thereby showing the importance of personal experiences in either preserving or relinquishing memories and identities as individuals navigate between vastly different cultures. In particular, in the article *"Some Reflections on Migration and Identity"* in this book, Benmayor and Skotnes argues that individual narratives play a crucial role in comprehending the mechanisms through which social forces influence and shape individual identities. These narratives also shed light on how individuals respond, act, and contribute to societal changes in a broader context.

Oral history serves as a valuable tool for exploring the perceptions of migrants regarding their past, cultural heritage, and experiences during their journey and integration into a new environment. It provides insights into how migrants perceive the favorable conditions of the new social environment while retaining their deeply rooted cultural values. In the study of Vietnamese refugees in the US after the war, oral history plays a crucial role in comprehending the relationship between cultural values, social integration, and economic progress within the context of refugee migration. Through the analysis of the oral history project on Vietnamese Americans allows for a deeper understanding of the emotions, beliefs, and values that have influenced the social integration process of Vietnamese refugees in the US.

## **2. Historical source and research methods**

*Historical Source:* The collection of 88 oral history interviews was conducted by the Vietnamese American Heritage Foundation in 2011. These interviews were donated to the Chao Center for Asian Studies at Rice University for the purpose of research. The interviews consist of recorded video conversations with Vietnamese Americans residing in Houston, USA. (Source: Vietnamese American Heritage Foundation oral history interviews, 2011, MS 647, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University).

*Research Methods:* The research employed thematic analysis to examine the 88 oral history interviews. Thematic analysis was chosen as it is well-suited to identify the main themes that emerge from the narratives. The process of thematic analysis followed the six-stage approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012): (i) becoming familiar with the data; (ii) coding and categorization; (iii) searching for potential themes; (iv) reviewing and refining the themes; (v) identifying and naming the themes; and (vi) write the report. This methodological approach enabled a thorough exploration and understanding of the cultural values, experiences, and social integration strategies discussed within the oral history interviews.

### **3. Results**

#### ***3.1. The migration of Vietnamese refugees to the United States (1975 - 2000)***

The first wave of refugee occurred both before and after April 30, 1975. In the week leading up to April 30, the United States evacuated American and Vietnamese troops, which included an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 Vietnamese individuals from the southern region. The majority of these migrants were soldiers from the army of the Republic of Vietnam and their families (Lipman, 2014). During the final days of April, 1975 approximately 3,000 people were airlifted out of Vietnam by American helicopters, while many others made their way to US embassies, airports, and barges in an attempt to leave the country (Freeman, 1995). Following April 30, 1975, an estimated 40,000 to 60,000 Vietnamese refugees embarked on small boats to reach the US 7th Fleet and Vietnamese naval vessels stationed in the South China Sea, seeking to flee Vietnam (Freeman, 1995).

The second wave (1979-1982), often referred to as the "boat people". This wave was primarily driven by socio-economic and war-related factors. Economic hardships resulting from trade restrictions, agricultural policies, and border conflicts led to approximately one million people, including Chinese Vietnamese, embarking on perilous sea journeys to leave Vietnam. The boat migrations were extremely dangerous as they involved overcrowded small ships, facing challenges such as rough waves, piracy, and hunger. The migrants traveled by boat to reach refugee camps located in various Southeast Asian countries, where they awaited acceptance and resettlement as immigrants by countries such as the United States, Australia, France, and Canada.

The third wave (1979 to 2000), was a organized movement facilitated through agreements between Vietnam and the United States. This wave aimed to legally bring Vietnamese individuals to the US. Several programs were implemented during this period, including the Orderly Departure Program (ODP), the Humanitarian Operation (HO), Public Interest Parole (PIP), Resettlement Opportunity for Vietnamese Returnees Program (ROVR), and the Amerasian Program. The Humanitarian Operation, Public Interest Parole, and Amerasian Programs officially finished in September 2000. By the end of 1996, the number of Vietnamese migrants under these programs exceeded 450,000 individuals.

Each wave of Vietnamese migration to the US not only differs in terms of transportation means, legal and illegal, but also in their migration experiences and socio-economic characteristics. The data provided by Kelly (1977) (1986) regarding the social characteristics of the first wave of migrants is quite interesting: approximately 20% have university degrees and about 38% have completed high school. Among them, 45.9% are under 18 years old and are dependent members of a family, while 35.6% are between the ages of 18 and 34. Therefore, Kelly stated that the first wave of Vietnamese migrants tends to be younger and predominantly male and after being in the US for over a year, 65% of this population still haven't made progress in English proficiency. However, Rutledge (1992) presents a different perspective. According to Rutledge, first-wave migrants, who

were assisted by the US during the evacuation, predominantly settle in urban areas and have already achieved financial stability prior to their arrival in the USA. In contrast, the second wave of migration mainly consists of individuals from rural areas. The third wave of migrants encompasses not only military veterans but also individuals with lower-ranking government positions, farmers, teachers, and traders. These individuals hail from both rural and urban areas, possess limited English proficiency, and have limited exposure to life outside their villages. It is believed that these third-wave immigrants may lack the qualifications required for success in American industries (Rumbaut, 1989).

Because of America's moral responsibilities to Vietnam, US President Gerald Ford signed The Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act (IMRA) into law on May 13, 1975 (Silverman, 2010). This Act provided government assistance to migrants from Southeast Asian countries affected by the war, facilitating their settlement in the United States. The assistance included the establishment of resettlement agencies, sponsorship programs, involvement of churches in supporting refugee integration, vocational training, job placement services, English language instruction, and financial support for living expenses. Between 1975 and 1978, the United States allocated approximately \$1 billion for the implementation of the IMRA program (Norman, 1983). The IMRA program expired in 1980 and was succeeded by the Refugee Act, which led to the creation of the Federal Refugee Resettlement Program and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Under this new law, states were required to develop resettlement plans and provide assistance such as training, job counseling, daycare, healthcare, and schooling for refugees. The legislation also limited the annual admission of refugees to 50,000, except in emergency situations, and allowed refugees to apply for permanent residency after one year of settlement and for citizenship after four years (Vo Dang, 2014).

Vietnamese refugees exhibit diverse socio-economic characteristics, which contribute to the various difficulties and challenges they encounter, particularly in terms of language barriers. While some may have prior experience working with Americans, studying abroad, or taking courses in the US, others face significant obstacles to socializing due to limited proficiency in English. To alleviate the strain on resources in any specific state, the US government dispersed Vietnamese refugees across different states. However, this dispersal policy criticized for neglecting the spiritual needs of the refugees and separating them from their ethnic communities.

The waves of refugee migration from Vietnam to the US between 1975 and 2000 were faced with different social receptions and attitudes. Third-wave migrants faced a less favorable reception from the American public, as there was a sense of compassion fatigue and reluctance to provide resources for refugees over an extended period of time (LeMaster and Zall, 1983). These migrants encountered anti-immigration sentiments, particularly during times of economic crisis when support programs, such as English language teaching and vocational training were cut. Discrimination against Vietnamese

refugees, who were considered second-class citizens, was prevalent during this period (Tseng, 2007). Children from Vietnamese refugee families, as well as other Southeast Asian children, experienced racial discrimination (Zhou and Xiong, 2005). In contrast, first and second-wave migrants, who arrived before 1980, encountered more sympathy and support from the American people. The US economy was in better shape during their arrival, and media coverage highlighting the hardships faced by the Vietnamese people after the war increased both the moral responsibility of the US government and the compassion of the public (Freeman, 1995). Unlike the challenges faced by first-wave migrants, third-wave migrants did not experience the same level of difficulty in social integration and psychological distress. They settled in established Vietnamese communities created by earlier waves of migrants and relied on them for employment, social support, cultural preservation, and spiritual needs. Due to limited time for English language courses and educational advancement, many third-wave migrants relied on their previous education and occupation for livelihoods, often engaging in manual labor in textile factories, beauty shops, or restaurants within the Vietnamese community or pursuing freelance work (Ha, 2002). In contrast, first and second-wave migrants had more time to pursue higher education, improve their English proficiency, and seek career advancements to enhance their social status.

### ***3.2. Cultural values for the social integration of Vietnamese refugees***

*Appreciate the self-effort of Vietnamese people based on the virtues of hard work, industriousness*

Vietnamese refugees who come to the United States often experienced a profound sense of loss. This was particularly true for first and second-wave migrants, who endured personal traumas such as family separation, leaving their homeland and loved ones. They also faced the challenge of adapting to a new culture, language barriers, and the needed to change jobs or pursued further education. The perilous journey of crossing borders, and the difficult living conditions in refugee camps left a lasting psychological impact on Vietnamese refugees. These experiences gave rise to a complex range of intertwined emotions, including grief, disorientation, and uncertainty about their future.

*"One thing that I later remembered was that during our time in the camp in Florida, I witnessed people lying on the folding chairs, which were placed side by side. My baby was also lying on one of those chairs, and it was hotting in the summer. It was already June, so he said, 'Daddy, turn on the air conditioner, it's too hot.' My son knows because he's used to it. Since it was so hot, I took him out, and there was a person nearby who seemed to be a marine or a non-commissioned officer, but I'm not entirely certain. He approached me and said, "Oh my gosh, We've come here, still asking for the air conditioner. We have to line up and do everything from the beginning" This sentence resonated poignantly with me: when I came here, I had to leave everything, nothing else. Now, I must strive to rise up, all we are in the same boat. This is what I heard when I left the camp" (Tran Van Thuan).*

Among Vietnamese refugees, there were many individuals who possessed certain qualifications, expertise, and held high social positions in their home country before leaving. These individuals invested years in education, training, and gaining professional experience, but their qualifications were not recognized in the US. They faced barriers that prevented them from continuing their careers at the same level. This led to feelings of loss and frustration when their qualifications - expertise are canceled.

"I studied a French program from childhood to adulthood, medical school was also in French, and my thesis was also in French, but it's not usable here after graduating from school. In Vietnam, I have to attend a refresher course, and also update my knowledge, but when I come to the US, I think there is no way for me to keep on occupational" (Tran Van Thuan)

The case of Vu Ban, a renowned and affluent cosmetologist in Saigon before 1975. Despite his previous success, when he arrived in the United States, Vu Ban found himself in a position where he needed to restart his studies and went through the process of standardizing his qualifications to adapted to the new society. This situation could be quite difficult, particularly for someone like Vu Ban, who was already 50 years old at the time.

*"I am also one of the first people to bring plastic surgery to the Vietnamese people, which is relatively new to the Vietnamese people, but it is very popular, especially in Japan, then Korea, and Southeast Asian countries. The Vietnamese people welcomed it with great enthusiasm because at that time we had singers, and movie stars, and everyone wanted to be beautiful. In Saigon, the war was not very serious, so people lived a very peaceful, relatively prosperous life, so they were interested in beauty problems. As a result, the plastic surgery profession in Saigon is very developed... That is the difficulty of all people who come to America, my family wants to send me to school, they have to open a grocery store to live for five years so that I can go to school, that is the difficulty of the migrants... They immigrated here and had to take care of their own studies to retake the exam to get a license to practice... We have to strive to practice again when we are 50 years old, at that age no one wants to do anything" (Vu Ban)*

Vietnamese people actively sought opportunities for personal and professional development after a period of receiving support from sponsors and churches. They recognized that relying on their own efforts was crucial to breaking free from external constraints and creating opportunities for success. Vietnamese individuals invested time and effort in learning the native language, actively engaged in skills training, and sought career guidance to enhance their professional qualifications. The Vietnamese claimed self-effort as a means toward independence and a better future for themselves and their families.

*"When I did the exhibition, I drew a picture of a camel crossing the desert in the middle of a large space, and during the stormy weather, the camel walk silently from A to Z. A camel carrying very heavy luggage, but with its head raised. When I explained to the Americans, I explained that this was the condition of our brothers when they came to*

*America like camels. The extremes of misery like that. But there is one point that we Vietnamese people never bend our knees to any problems, we still hold our heads high like a camel, going from one point to another, walking slowly but surely to the destination" (Duong Phuoc Tan)*

*Duong Phuoc Tan's metaphor of the "camel crossing the desert" vividly captures the challenging and arduous journey that Vietnamese refugees undertook when they left their homeland and started anew in countries like the United States. Throughout their stories, Vietnamese refugees often expressed a deep sense of national spirit and pride, as well as a strong attachment to their community, traditions, and cultural identity. These elements serve as a driving force for their resilience and their desire to succeed in their new lives. When Vietnamese refugees arrived in the United States, they often encountered difficulties and initially relied on assistance from others, such as government programs, sponsors, or community organizations. However, they perceived this reliance on assistance as a source of shame. Their sense of self and national pride did not allow them to accept any support forever. They always referred to the will to make efforts and self-reliance.*

*"We have the will and the spirit of independence, when we migrate here with people whose minds are discouraged, we only want to enjoy the money subsidizes. But I have my national spirit, self-control, and pride, as I said at first, I am a high-ranking military officer, unable to receive a lifetime allowance. Firstly, for our own life, and secondly, for our children and grandchildren to see to follow our example. We should not rely on that help indefinitely, but how do I have a chance to move on." (La Huy Anh).*

The narratives of Vietnamese refugees consistently emphasized the importance of striving, independence, and hard work as fundamental values within their culture. Vietnamese people viewed these values as distinguishing characteristics that set them apart from the Americans

*"Vietnamese people are hard workers, we are better than Americans because we work hard, the reason why I succeed is because we work hard. There are many things that I see that Americans do the same job but they do not accept hard work. If I work hard, I will be more successful than them. I say for example the US they just want to work 8 hours a day, then go home after time is up. Weekends off work, going out, a year they want to have three weeks or even a month to go on vacation. During the time we migrate here, you know that if you don't work, you won't be able to support yourself. If you want to send your children to school or create a family to settle down and settle down, of course, you have to go to work to forget vacations and weekends, so it's a success for that reason" (Bui Dang Trinh)*

Vietnamese refugees took great pride in their achievements, no matter how small, as they saw them as tangible evidence of their resilience, determination, and ability to overcome challenges. Each milestone represented a significant step forward on their journey towards personal and career advancement.



*“In order to survive, everyone has a job, if you work hard in this US, there is no loss. Like me and my friends who lost their legs, many of my friends when they were still in Vietnam, were all engineers, but they migrated here, they also have to work as dishwashers and have to do all kinds of jobs. But when I see that in this country, when I go to do those jobs, again, I feel very proud because even President Clinton, used to be a dishwasher, taking care of children. I think that only through suffering can people progress. I also told my children that after going through difficulties, they will be successful, but if they don't work hard, they will fail” (Nguyen Xuan Long).*

Vietnamese refugees adopted a two-fold approach in their livelihood strategies: short-term plans and long-term plans. In the short-term, Vietnamese refugees prioritized learning English, as it is a crucial skill for communication and integration into American society. They understood that proficiency in English opens doors to better job opportunities and access to resources. Additionally, they took up temporary manual jobs, often in low-skilled sectors, to provide for their families and meet immediate financial needs. Simultaneously, Vietnamese refugees maintain a long-term vision for their future. They recognized the importance of acquiring professional qualifications and higher education to secure stable and well-paying jobs. They were willing to make sacrifices and invest in their own education, even if it meant starting from scratch or giving up their previous professional qualifications and social status.

*“My first job is to take care of children with mental health disability... Honestly, this job makes me panic too, taking care of these kids is so hard that I'm just like them, crazy crazy crazy, sometimes looking up at the sky, then looking down at the earth, I don't know anything anymore. I thought in my mind, I've spent so many years of hard work and study like this, but come here to do this job, I have to rise at any cost, have to move on, have to go to school and work.” (Dang Xuan Ngo).*

In the beginning, most Vietnamese refugees did not have much time for themselves and their families. Many Vietnamese took on various jobs, sometimes multiple jobs simultaneously, to make ends meet and cover the expenses associated with their education and daily living.

*When my wife was still in Vietnam, her only job was to study. After a while after marrying me, I was in the army all day, but my wife stayed at home to take care of my grandfather and grandmother, so she didn't work at all. But until she came to America, my wife also went to university but only studied English. At that time, she did not even think about studying professionally. She studied English for about two years, then I worked and learned at the same time. For most of those four years, my wife and I didn't see each other, we only met on Sundays. Because I usually go from early morning until midnight, I go to work and go to school, and my wife also goes to school and then goes to work. So if anything happens, I need something, I write on paper to let her know, and we don't see each other until the weekend.” (Nguyen Cuong).*

*Upholding the sacrifice and intergenerational responsibility in stability and development*

In Vietnamese or Asian culture in general, the strong sense of mutual responsibility and intergenerational commitment within families is not only a natural social security net but also a motivation for members to always consider individual actions in relation to family members. Parents in Vietnamese and Asian cultures typically place a great deal of emphasis on their children's future and invest significant resources, both financial and emotional, in their education and development. They make sacrifices to ensure that their children have access to opportunities and can achieve success in their lives. In return, children are expected to fulfill their obligations and meet their parents' expectations. This includes studying diligently, striving for academic success, and eventually pursuing careers that will bring pride and honor to their family.

*"I have also had high positions such as hospital director, and chief medical department. In terms of politics, I applied for the provincial council, but when I came over here, I was very disappointed, my spirit was very low. I would also like to tell you one more memory of when I lived in such a small village. I came here, I went to work after two weeks, and after three weeks I got my driver's license. When I go to work, from where I live to the Nursing Home, in the nearby hospital there is a Nursing Home, right next to the road where I usually go to work, there is a pass, and there are many dangerous slopes. When going down the pass, sometimes I thought that I let go of the steering wheel to let the car go downhill. Speaking of which, I'm still emotional now, just let the car plunge downhill. If I had come here alone, I would have done so, but I think I still have a wife and four children. Oh no, at that time my wife was pregnant, it was in June, July, and August, and my wife was born in October. Sometimes I want to give up everything, but I think I have to be responsible for my children, so I have to try and that's the motivation I have to try in everything." (Tran Van Thuan)*

Vietnamese refugees in the first generation prioritized the needs and achievements of their children over their own personal needs and desires. They viewed their sacrifices as essential investments for the long-term stability and success of their family. These sacrifices can take various forms, including working multiple jobs, enduring hardships, and dedicating a significant portion of their time and resources to support their children's education and development.

*"The problem of making a living, everyone knows that it is difficult at first. But I realize that we accept to leave, I think this place is not our land, but the land of our descendants in the future. It means a living environment, not only freedom but also a place where each person's potential can be developed to be able to progress in a new society. So we accept sacrifices and endured hardship so that our descendants could have a good future tomorrow. You can't imagine, in cold winter, we had to stand by the wrong price panel, scrape off the paint clean, then draw a new one. At that time, I received a minimum salary of only 5 - 6 dollars, still accepted to get past it at first. Then I used to experience many jobs in many different factories... I used to be working for a factory that produce flowers, then worked in a shop selling clothes, then at a factory making tools for airplanes, etc. All kinds of jobs" (Nguyen Van Thang).*

*Emphasizing the tradition of studiousness promoting social success based on academic achievements*

The studious tradition is a significant theme highlighted in the narratives of Vietnamese refugees. Education holds immense value in Vietnamese culture, and it serves as a means of maintaining their cultural heritage and identity while also facilitating progress in the new society.

*“My father was very focused on Confucian morality. He used to teach me about Confucianism. He often warned that children must study hard, uneducated people do not know anything, “Humans are uneducated, there is no reason”. And my father often told me that there is gold in the books, when I open the book to learn, I own gold. He used the word “Pearl in the book”. So the things that he taught me are my life’s guidelines, I have to learn at any cost” (Bui Dang Trinh).*

The emphasis on education is deeply rooted in Vietnamese cultural values, where knowledge and learning are highly regarded. Vietnamese refugees recognized the importance of education not only as a pathway to personal growth and success but also as a way to preserve their cultural identity and traditions. The studious tradition also instills discipline, perseverance, and a strong work ethic in Vietnamese refugees. They understand that education requires dedication, effort, and continuous learning.

*“My father definitely forced us to study. In the past, we all went to school, nine or ten brothers, but it was very difficult to study. Because going to school costs money already, and when we were young, we hardly had a jolly time while learning. My father said that when you finish learning a lesson, you can play whatever you want, but after learning, what else can you play?” (Nguyen Tran).*

In stories, Vietnamese refugees always emphasized the importance of learning and education is highly valued in Vietnamese culture, and this emphasis is reflected in the narratives of Vietnamese refugees. They viewed education as a pathway to personal and collective advancement, affirming the position of the refugee community and instilling a sense of pride, self-respect, and national identity. This sense of communal support and encouragement created a strong bond within the refugee community. They understand the importance of collective responsibility and work together to contribute to the well-being of their families and the broader community. By fostering a culture that values education and promotes academic achievement, they not only uplift individuals but also strengthen the social fabric of the Vietnamese refugee community.

*“When I brought my children here in late 1994, some of my children were over 18 years old. While at the social security department, a young man told me that he studied aircraft repair, but went to work in the tax industry. He said he takes any course when he has free time and this is a good environment to pursue education so we have to take advantage of that. We Vietnamese are very smart. Before in Vietnam, the situation was difficult, we didn't have the opportunity to study, so I told my children that they could study freely, and*

*learn as much as possible, being in debt is okay, as long as my children keep studying. I have to make my Vietnamese people shine. You see, in America or other countries, Vietnamese people hold important positions” (Nguyen Xuan Long).*

### **3.3. Identifying favorable social conditions for the rehabilitation and development of the Vietnamese refugee community**

For Vietnamese refugees, the United States represents the embodiment of the "American Dream" - a concept that signifies the belief that hard work, determination, and resilience can lead to success and a better life. The American Dream holds the promise of advancement, opportunities for social and economic mobility, and the chance to build a prosperous future.

#### *Land of opportunity*

The narratives of Vietnamese refugees highlighted the perception that America is a land of opportunity, where individuals have the potential to pursue their dreams and achieve success regardless of their background or origins. This belief served as a powerful motivator for Vietnamese refugees to make efforts to seize the opportunities available to them in the United States. Vietnamese refugees understand that in order to fully embrace the opportunities presented by their new society, they need to broaden their observations, open their minds, and adapt to the American culture.

*“This country is not a gold forest and silver sea like Vietnam, but this country is a land of opportunity. Everyone can't just be passive and only work hard to get better. On the contrary, many people come here, people also work hard, but people open up their eyes to widen view, people open up their minds, go out to observe to know why this shop was be doing well, why that other shop was failed, how to succeed. Equal opportunities for everyone, everyone has the same opportunity, let's seize that opportunity. And I tell everyone that when we come to this country, firstly, we have to learn English, secondly, we have to adapt to the new society, we have to work. For example, pay attention to how the shop is organized, how they welcome customers, how they keep customers, so that after a period of hard work and saving, we also open a own business” (Ha Ngoc Cu).*

#### *The land of learning*

The perception of America as a land with abundant learning opportunities resonates strongly in the narratives of Vietnamese refugees. The Vietnamese tradition of studiousness, which has been passed down through generations, shapes their perspective on the value of education. They quickly realize that the United States offers a superior education system with easy access, providing fertile ground for personal and intellectual growth. The metaphor "forest of learning" used to describe the educational access opportunities available in the United States reflects the belief that educational resources are abundant and readily available to individuals of any background and age. Vietnamese refugees firmly believed that as long as they had the will and aspiration to learn, the educational opportunities in the United States were limitless. It is not uncommon for first-

generation Vietnamese refugees to return to school at a later stage in life to pursue professional qualifications. They recognized the importance of continuous learning and considered education mean to enhance their skills and increase their employability.

*“According to my experience, the first is that this country is a country with a very advantage environment for the young generation. Any family that emigrates here, advantage about what? in any field need to have knowledge, and if anyone is properly educated, it's easy to find a job. This place also encourages our children to go to school. There are also many jobs, requiring expertise, if someone graduates with a certain specialty, it is relatively easy to get a job and have stability” (Bui Dang Trinh)*

They viewed knowledge and qualifications as stepping stones for personal advancement and success. By investing in their education, they strive to improve their career prospects and create a better future for themselves and their families. Therefore, they encourage the younger generations to value and devote time to learn for a better life and a better future.

*“Our family tries to work, no matter how hard we work, we still tell each other that have to work hard for our children to go to school, our family tradition has always emphasized learning. I encourage my children so that they realize that to migrate to America, which is a country where modernity and civilization is very high, they should try to study. My children also know that living in this country get education, their parents are beside them, taking care of food, housing, transportation, paying tuition to go to school. Instead, before, in Vietnam, if you wanted to study abroad in this place, your family had no financial ability, but now that you live here and have such advantageous conditions, you have to go to school, so since then I encouraged our children to study” (Bui Dang Trinh)*

*“In Vietnam, I worry about crossing the border at night, I don't study anything. I'm so be thirsty for knowledge, over here, the opportunity to learn is like a forest. The first few years I rushed to study, I didn't pay attention to anything more...maybe I've been deprived of learning opportunities for many years in Vietnam, so coming over here makes me overwhelmed.. Studying day and night but still fascinated, must say this society It's full of opportunities to learn too, as long as you have the will” (Nguyen Anh Lan)*

#### *Land to change lives*

Vietnamese refugees perceived the United States as a conducive social environment for life transformation and the opportunity to re-establish their own socio-economic identity. They saw the U.S. as a place where they could leave behind the traumas and feelings of inferiority from the past and created a new life for themselves. They believed that the U.S. offered a multitude of economic opportunities that can positively impact their lives. The positive perceptions of economic opportunities in the U.S. strongly influenced the decision-making process of Vietnamese refugees regarding their livelihood strategies and self-reliance. Through their experiences and observations, Vietnamese refugees shared these positive perceptions with others, which strengthened their belief in the American dream.

*“In the United States, one thing that everyone can see is that we Vietnamese people here, as I say the majority, the people who cross the border are people who live in the fields, live in the sea. All year round and month, they work in the fields, then all year round carry fishing nets to fish for shrimp and fish. Those people they immigrated to America, they have makeover. They are no longer the wretched man who suffer in the fields or plowing deep or for fishing for shrimp. Now that they and their children have become doctors, engineers, have become scientists. It proves that this place is an environment is a very advantage for, not count our generation, so for the second, third, and fourth generations and our descendants would better in life” (Le Dinh Cuong)*

The phrases "successful," "stable," "graduated engineers," and "graduated doctor" reflect the satisfaction Vietnamese refugees felt regarding their academic achievements and the efforts they had put into their education. These achievements hold significant importance as they contribute to their social positioning in the new society. Through their journey of settlement and social integration, Vietnamese refugees commonly shared their socio-economic accomplishments as a testament to their hard work, personal beliefs, and the value of their cultural heritage.

*“I have six children in all, two boys and four girls, they are all to make a reputation for themselves now, and they all have had a stable job and life here in America. They also work as engineers, also graduated as engineers, in economics, they are very successful. As for my grandchildren, they are also grown-up now, four of them are engineers, two are teachers, and then there is a grandchild who is a doctor” (Le Thi Thu Cuc).*

Vietnamese refugees often hold a belief in the intelligence and capabilities of Vietnamese people, considering them capable of excelling in various fields and attaining prestigious positions that are highly valued in American society. This belief stems from a sense of pride within their families and the broader Vietnamese community. They viewed the achievements of Vietnamese individuals as a testament to the cultural values and beliefs that have contributed to their success.

*“Our Vietnamese education system is very wise, encouraging children to go to school. Most of the Vietnamese here pass doctors and engineers a lot, but the Mexicans who come here do not pass. But we have the spirit of culture, the spirit of the nation, in the past, Vietnam did not have as many Vietnamese doctors and engineers as now, now there are more. In addition, the Vietnamese who come here to do business are well-off, successful, have many houses, and trade millions of dollars every month” (Truong Nhu Phung).*

The cultural values ingrained in Vietnamese society, such as effort, industriousness, suffering, hard work, sacrifice, and responsibility, are all channeled towards the pursuit of education, expertise, and knowledge. Education was seen as a means to achieve personal success, bring pride to the family, and contribute to the advancement of the nation. The instrumental nature of these cultural values was evident as they are viewed as pathways to attain individual achievements and social recognition. By emphasizing the importance of education and hard work, Vietnamese refugees align themselves with the values and expectations of the American society they now inhabit.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

According to Ryan (1987), the employment rate among Vietnamese migrants who arrived in the US in 1981 (second wave) was only 18.8%. However, the employment rate among Vietnamese migrants who had arrived since 1975 had increased to 64.2% by that time. The median income of second-wave Vietnamese families also showed improvement, increasing from \$755 per month in 1978 to \$1,220 per month in 1981. Ryan's research indicates that over time, Vietnamese refugees demonstrated progress in various aspects. Their English proficiency improved significantly, with the percentage of English speakers rising from 9.2% to 76%. Property ownership also increased, with the percentage of Vietnamese-Americans owning homes increasing from 2.9% in 1975 to 65.4% in 1981. Moreover, there was a significant decline in the percentage of Vietnamese migrants reliant on Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA), with the number dropping from 81.9% in 1975 to 13.9% in 1981.

Based on US Census data from 1990 to 2000, Zhou and Bankston III (2004) reported further progress among the Vietnamese community. The percentage of Vietnamese individuals who could not communicate in English decreased from 42% to 34%. The proportion of university graduates aged 25 and over increased from 13% to 17%, indicating educational advancement. Additionally, the poverty rate declined from 35% to 24%, indicating improved economic conditions. These findings suggest that after more than three decades of settlement in the US, Vietnamese migrants experienced significant social integration and economic progress. The ability to improve English proficiency, increased property ownership, reduced reliance on assistance programs, higher educational attainment, and decreased poverty rates reflect the changing circumstances of the Vietnamese community in the US.

The views on educational achievement among Vietnamese-American children are divided into two main perspectives. The first perspective suggests that the highest-achieving Vietnamese-American youth tend to uphold traditional values and maintain a level of cultural distinctiveness rather than fully assimilating into American culture. Caplan et al. (1991) argue that the educational success of Vietnamese-Americans can be attributed, in part, to the transmission of traditional cultural principles across generations. According to this view, cultural adaptation, which involves accepting the values and cultural standards of the new society while preserving one's own culture, plays a significant role in academic achievement. The second perspective emphasizes the importance of Americanization as a means for Vietnamese individuals to achieve prosperity in American society. Kao and Tienda (1995) conducted research that shows a correlation between degrees of cultural assimilation and academic achievement. They found that immigrant parents' high expectations for their children can lead to higher academic performance. This perspective suggests that embracing American cultural norms and practices is beneficial for educational success.

Portes and Rumbaut (2006) offer insights that align with the first perspective, highlighting the significance of family and community cohesion for academic achievement. They

argue that a strong relationship between children, family, and community can positively impact academic performance. They also emphasize the importance of considering the immigration context, reception in the new country, and socio-economic characteristics of parents when assessing the influence of cultural values. The authors recommend reinforcing family and community ties rather than promoting premature integration or complete Americanization.

The oral history interviews conducted by the Vietnamese American Heritage Foundation have provided valuable insights into the social integration and economic success of the Vietnamese American community in the United States. These interviews have revealed that selected cultural values play a significant role in facilitating social integration and promoting remarkable economic achievements. The migration experience stories shared during these interviews provide a deeper understanding of the difficulties, challenges, and emotions faced by Vietnamese refugees. These stories highlight the influence of cultural values on their attitudes, actions, and decisions in the new social context. It is observed that neither Americanization nor cultural conservatism alone support the relationship between culture and the social integration and economic progress of Vietnamese Americans. Instead, Vietnamese stories and cultural experiences demonstrate meaningful connections between cultural values and social integration, as well as the educational achievements of their children. Vietnamese refugees maintain their cultural values while also embracing the values of the host country. The instrumental cultural values include an emphasis on self-effort, a tradition of studiousness, a profound appreciation of education and sacrifice, and a strong sense of intergenerational responsibility. These values align with the social conditions and success criteria prevalent in American society. Over time, many Vietnamese refugees have achieved significant levels of social mobility and hold highly valued positions in American society.

The analysis of a oral history project about Vietnamese refugees sheds light on the relationship between cultural values and the social integration and economic progress of Vietnamese refugees. By capturing and examining personal stories and memories, the project reveals the cultural values that shape the identity of the Vietnamese ethnic community in a multi-ethnic country like the United States. These stories provide a deeper understanding of the traumas and varied experiences during the migration and settlement process, as well as the journey of integration and aspirations for the future. It becomes evident that education is highly valued and considered a crucial factor in achieving stability and success, not only for individuals but also for future generations. Vietnamese refugees recognize the transformative power of education in breaking the cycle of poverty, creating opportunities for advancement, and revitalizing communities. By analyzing these narratives, the project highlights several cultural values that define the Vietnamese ethnic community. These values contribute to their cultural identity and play a significant role in their social integration and economic progress. Understanding these



cultural values can inform policymakers and community initiatives aimed at promoting the successful social integration of immigrants, not only for Vietnamese refugees but for immigrant communities in general.

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