DAUGHTER FROM DANANG | ARTICLE

Living in Two Cultures

FROM THE COLLECTION: THE ASIAN AMERICAN, NATIVE HAWAIIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER EXPERIENCE

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.

Andrew Lam

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 Nhat 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. He himself stayed behind and left on a Navy ship on April 30, 1975 when he heard on the radio that General Duong Van Minh, acting president of South Vietnam, had surrendered.

I remember spending a few hours at Clark Air Base in the Philippines, wondering what had just happened. I also remember eating a ham sandwich and drinking milk, my first American meal. It was the best sandwich I ever had in my life though I didn't like the milk. Next we flew to Guam where a refugee camp was already set up to receive tens of thousands of Vietnamese refugees. I was confused, frightened, and from all available evidence -- the khaki army tents in the Guam refugee camp, the scorching heat, the long lines for army food rations, the fetid odor of the communal latrines, the freshly bulldozed ground under my sandaled feet -- I was also homeless. 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. We all wore army jackets given to us by the GIs and mine reached down to my ankles. Luckily, my family was among the first few families who were sponsored out of the camp. My mother's sister was living in San Francisco at the time and she drove down and took us back to San Francisco with her. I went to summer school and entered the 7th grade in autumn and became an American.

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

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. It was interesting: Vietnam was the first television war and though traumatized by that war, everyone in America knows something about Vietnam. It gave me an entry to the American imagination that was not otherwise available to a kid, say, from Sri Lanka. The truth was that I had not killed anyone but yes, I have seen dead bodies, and had seen burnt out helicopters and villages during the war, being an army brat. I became a story teller. 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.

The America that received my family in the mid-70s was not an America that could have imagined a Pacific Rim future. It was an America which had retreated from the Far East, traumatized by its latest adventure abroad. Vietnamese living in America had little access to Vietnam. It was the height of the Cold War. It took six months, if at all, for a letter to reach that country. We were cut off from our homeland in the United States. We adjusted quickly to life in America because of it.

Luckily the first wave of refugees were among the crème de la crème, as they say, of the south -- doctors, lawyers, government officers, professors -- and, having experienced far less trauma than what Vietnamese boat people experienced later on, and having no experience of life under communism (where children of the bourgeois class were deprived of schooling) we adjusted rather quickly in the United States. But we also managed to create a little community and gathered for various occasions, most of which were very political. We rallied each April 30 in front of City Hall in San Francisco and demanded freedom and democracy for Vietnam and so on. We celebrate Tet, Vietnamese new year, together. We mourn the loss of homeland and the fate of being an exile. In other words, we share a particular history, and were very close.


Andrew Lam as a child

Much has changed a quarter of a century later, in a globalized and post-Cold War world...

Today I can e-mail my cousin in Vietnam and I can send him money via a bank. I do not have to hide it in a tube of toothpaste. And movement back and forth between Vietnam and the U.S. is the norm after normalization. Vietnamese newspapers in the States freely advertise flights to Vietnam and phone cards so you can call home to talk to your grandmother anytime you like. If we all considered ourselves exiles in the late 70s, only a small percentage do so now. Now the picture of the Vietnamese community in the United States is a very diverse one. There are still a staunchly anti-communist faction, especially those who suffered life in re-education camps and whose family members were killed by the Hanoi government. But there are also foreign exchange students, tourists from Vietnam, American-born Vietnamese who have no memories of the war, people who go back and forth, and even those who went back to live and work in their homeland, and so on. It's estimated that more than 200,000 Vietnamese living abroad return to Vietnam every year during Tet. I myself have gone back eight times as a journalist. I am more familiar with Saigon than Los Angeles.

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. When the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh spoke at Berkeley last year, there was standing room only, and most of the people who attended were white Americans. Buddhism is on the rise here and the longing for the Far East is growing. Witness the number of Asian directors now working in Hollywood. What was once considered private or ethnic culture is moving into the public sphere... I was interviewed on NPR when Campbell soup decided to make Vietnamese *pho* -- beef and noodle soup. "How did you feel?" The interviewer asked. "Well," I said, "it seems inevitable. Think of pizza and burritos. Grandma still makes it best, but in America, if it's good, it's appropriated and mass produced." If I associated *pho* with a particular geography, I have to change my mind. It's an age of open borders and perceptions are shifting very quickly.

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? There is a communication gap. 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." And they should 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.

The other issue is the question all diasporas tend to ask: how to sustain a community over time? There are several diasporas that the Vietnamese community can learn from: the Chinese, the Jewish, the Indian. These have been in existence much longer and can provide models for fledgling ones.

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 shook my hand (which in itself was very unusual) and 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. It was competitive and difficult. 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.

I myself was lucky. My parents found jobs and moved us to the suburbs when I was in high school. I didn't have to make money to send home to someone in Vietnam. I was the youngest in the family. There were no big demands on me. I was free to decide what to do with my life. But if my parents had been stuck behind in Vietnam and living in the New Economic Zone, I would have been an electrical engineer by now.

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.

Immigrants always face the challenge of how much to assimilate to American culture and how much of their native culture to keep. How has this played out in the Vietnamese American community?
I think in many ways normalization with Vietnam has helped boost a revival of Vietnamese culture dramatically. I know young Vietnamese Americans who went back, or visited for the first time, and came back speaking Vietnamese whereas they didn't speak a word before. These totally Americanized kids suddenly feel connected to another place and it gives them an edge over their American counterparts.

I think all Americans would love to have another country connected to their history. Ireland, Italy, China, whatever. To have a hyphen connected to your identity makes you feel cosmopolitan and sophisticated, a bridge to some other place. You have something that you can call your own. This is a recent phenomenon. Before the idea of a melting pot was still the aim, at least by the institutions. But now it's chic to be ethnic, to speak another language, to feel connected to another culture, to another set of values, to a sensibility. It's a post-modern age where options are far more available than they were to someone who lived in America in the mid-20th century. And far more individualistic. You pick and choose. Stay traditional as you want or be as modern as you want. Options are available at your beck and call.

Besides, the pressure to assimilate is no longer as heavy as before. If anything, all Americans are learning to assimilate to new cultures that keep showing up at the American shores. In San Francisco, blacks, hispanics, whites, all know how to use chopsticks. Go to Bolsa in Orange County and see non Vietnamese eating *pho* and buying Vietnamese groceries. My mother complains that I speak to much English in the house, but as the most conservative member of our family she, too, has changed. She goes to the gym, does aerobics. She prays to Buddha, but bets on football. I don't watch football, but she's fanatic. So who's more American than whom?

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.

It takes a while to learn to live in a civil society. It takes a while to have the idea that the police work for you sink in. At least that's the idea. In some neighborhoods, the inner city, for example, that may not be true. 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. Mind you, I was stepping out of bounds as an interpreter, but I couldn't help myself. My grandmother, when she was alive, saw her dead husband, in dreams, or late at night sitting in his old chair for a brief moment, and there was nothing wrong with her. Practically all old people talk like that lady. It was a way for her to say she mourns her losses. It took a while, but I think the American psychologist came around. They have to: they can't put an entire population in the insane asylum, can they?

The other classic example in terms of health problems is the one that I'm sure that's well recorded in medical school. A little Vietnamese boy showed up in school with red marks on his back. "Who did this to you?" the teacher asked. "My father," he answered. His father was immediately arrested. Having no idea how to explain what he did, his English limited, and lacking money to hire a lawyer, he ended up serving time in jail. He was so frustrated he hung himself. What he did was a typical thing: Vietnamese practice *cao gio* -- a kind of therapeutic massage for people who come down with a cold. They scrape the skin on your back with a spoon or a coin, using an ointment. He wasn't abusing his child. He was helping him, but nobody believed the man.

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 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. They will always look, they will always search, they will never be satisfied until they have all the fragments of their life put together. It's an inevitable human impulse.

What parts of Vietnamese culture do you see thriving in Vietnamese-American communities?
The wedding is the biggest event in Vietnamese American community. It's the time where people dress up, meet, exchange information and show off their children, meet new people, and so on. Vietnamese in the U.S. live for weddings and a typical wedding has about 300 people at the reception. Five hundred people came to my brother's wedding and it's not the biggest. People invite themselves. They want to come.

Vietnamese newspapers, television shows and magazines are thriving. So much so that the *San Jose Mercury News* has a Vietnamese language weekly. Vietnamese read quite a bit and they thirst for information regarding Vietnam. Go to any Vietnamese restaurants in the Bay Area and you'll see three or four give-away newspapers full of news on Vietnam.

Vietnamese love their Vietnamese singers. Some Vietnamese American singers make quite a bit of money singing in Vietnamese communities in Los Angeles, San Jose, San Diego, Dallas, Houston, New York. Tickets can go as high as $40 a pop.

Food is thriving. Vietnamese restaurants are packed. I know a Ph.D. student, an American-born Vietnamese. She speaks very little Vietnamese and is a feminist and a vegan. But she has a dark confession: she eats *pho* soup. Sometimes she can't help herself. She's got to have that beef broth

In a newspaper article, Heidi Bub's adoptive mother, Ann Neville, dismissed the importance of cultural differences, saying, "...we're all part of the human race..." Do you agree?
I think we are all part of the human race, but differences will always remain. That's what makes the human race interesting. If everything is merged all you get is a bland, uninteresting picture. It's easy to dismiss other cultures when yours is the dominant one. It's easy to dismiss other sensibilities when you assume yours is the only one that's important, and that it's the only one that matters. We're all part of the human race, but we are different by degree -- and that difference will never go away.

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. A Vietnamese American coming home for the first time will always save a few hundred if not a few thousand dollars to give to his family and relatives. For him to leave Vietnam in the first place the family had to sacrifice quite a bit -- gold, land, dollars -- to purchase a seat on a boat for him to escape. He owes them. 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 and unity her family there showed. What are the ties that bind a Vietnamese family together?
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 and Vinh's awkwardness in the film about Heidi's gifts?
I suppose it might be rude, but I'm also very Americanized and my family and I open Christmas gifts in front of each other all the time. But 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. I don't' know if Kimand Vinh's awkwardness came from that or rather that they had never received gifts from America before and they were simply awed by the experience. I was, when I was a child in Vietnam and received my first Sears catalog gift from an uncle in the U.S. It was like a miracle. The gift wrap was so beautiful. And the smell of my new pair of jeans was out of this world.

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.

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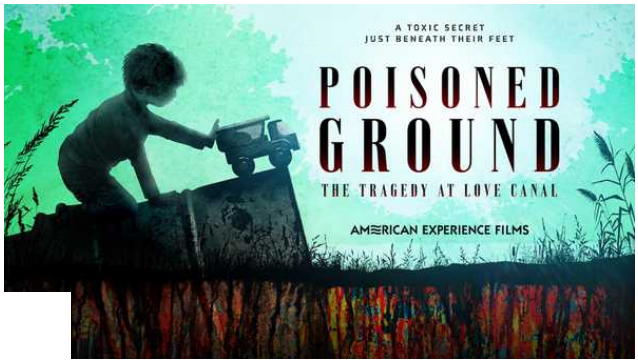
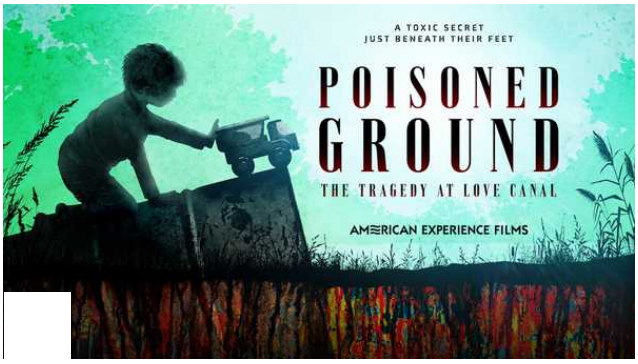


Poisoned Ground: The Tragedy at Love Canal

In the late 1970s, residents of Love Canal in Niagara Falls, NY discovered their neighborhood had been built on a former chemical waste dump. Housewives activated to create a grassroots movement that galvanized the landmark Superfund Bill.



Poisoned Ground: The Tragedy at Love Canal (español)

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Heidi Bub was named Mai Thi Hiep at her birth in Danang in southern Vietnam.

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Mai Thi Kim

Through a difficult time of war and devastation, Mai Thi Kim managed to keep her four children fed, clothed and sheltered.

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Had Kim not sent little Hiep to the United States, Vinh said he would have raised her as his own child.

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