

## **Amerasians: Caught between cultures // Encouraged to come here, embittered by problems**

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### **Body**

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Scorned in their country as less than true Vietnamese, they came to America seeking the place they were told they belong.

But for many of the 17,000 children of Vietnamese mothers and American servicemen who've arrived here since the 1987 Homecoming Act, hope has led to disillusionment.

Not only has the homecoming promised by a special act of Congress failed to materialize, but many Amerasians also have suffered after immigrating with "fraudulent families" - unrelated Vietnamese who use them as tickets to America.

"In Vietnam, they say when Amerasians come, the Americans will like them and will help them much, the fathers will look for them and Amerasians will have houses and many things," says Thuy Le, 24, whose fraudulent family broke up after arriving in Washington, D.C. "But it's not true."

The Homecoming Act acknowledged American responsibility for Amerasians by encouraging them to come here and arranging their passage. In the process, it created one of the country's newest and most unusual immigrant groups.

No one knows how many Amerasians were born during America's involvement in Vietnam. But 17,000 Amerasians ages 17 to 31 and 48,000 of their family members have come so far.

The State Department expects another 10,000 Amerasians and 20,000 family members to immigrate - most of them by next year.

Most Amerasians know little English and less about American life. With limited education, some expect they can "pick up" English because they are half American. Others think a first name is all they'll need to find their fathers.

Few realize that many Americans have never heard the term "Amerasian." Few ever meet their fathers. And ignorance of American race relations makes transition especially difficult for the 10% to 15% of Amerasians whose fathers were black.

While some black Amerasians are clearly Asian in appearance, others are not. "They all think I'm American," says Hung Nguyen, 24, of the black residents of his Riverdale, Md., apartment complex. "They look at me, and I get scared," he says through a translator.

Although Amerasians are sent to the Philippines for six months of classes, including lessons in the use of American kitchens, the cultural gap is tough to bridge.

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"They're just in shock when they get off the plane from the Philippines," says Anita Menghetti, a consultant on Amerasian resettlement. "These are people who've never been more than 100 miles from home their entire lives."

Like many, Thuy Le left Vietnam because her family urged her to leave: "They said 'Vietnam is not my country.'"

Cold as that sentiment may sound to Americans, it is common in Vietnam, where local officials often harass Amerasians and their families, driving them out of school or detaining them at police stations for questioning.

Le's foster parents weren't willing to leave their homeland. But they agreed to a bargain becoming increasingly common in Vietnam. They arranged for another family to pay the bribes local Vietnamese officials often demand of Amerasians applying to immigrate. In exchange, Le claimed the family was her own so they could come to America with her.

While there are no real numbers, officials say fraudulent family cases soared in the past two years after new rules made it tougher for non-Amerasian Vietnamese to come as refugees.

But eliminating fraudulent cases is tough, says State Department spokeswoman Julie Reside, because few Amerasians have documents to prove their family history. Officials often rely on physical appearance in determining who is Amerasian; identifying Vietnamese relatives is even harder.

Reside says the State Department has heightened its scrutiny of applicants. But a recent General Accounting Office warned the agency may now be inadvertently turning away some legitimate Amerasians under the tougher standards.

Once here, fraudulent families often mistreat or desert Amerasians, says Peter Daniels, coordinator of St. Anselm's, a private refugee resettlement agency. He estimates 20% of the Amerasians in Orange County, Calif., come with fraudulent families, and "each one of them breaks up eventually."

Le says her fraudulent family's attitude toward her changed abruptly once they left Vietnam. "They treated me like a servant," Le says. Less than a month after arriving, Le was so unhappy she moved out to live alone.

The poverty and discrimination Amerasians face in Vietnam makes them better off here, Le says. But she knows she is lucky: With her high school education and fluent English, she found a job as an outreach worker at a resettlement agency.

More common is the isolation of those Le helps. Except to attend English classes or go to hotel or factory jobs, many never leave their apartments. "I don't know any Americans except for the teachers at school," says My Trang Pham, 24.

Many wonder about finding their fathers, but obstacles are large. The Red Cross Office of International Services has received about 500 requests for help in finding fathers. Searches are completed about 10% of the time. In most cases, the person searched for agrees to release their address. About 20% refuse; an additional 10% have died.

Hung Nguyen's older brother Phan, 26, dismissed the idea of even trying. The pictures and name his mother showed him back in Vietnam have long faded from memory. "All the Americans, they all look alike," he says.

Amerasians, by definition

The term Amerasian can be used to describe children of Asian and American parents born here or abroad.

But the 1987 Homecoming Act applies only to the Amerasians born in Vietnam between 1962 and 1975 to Vietnamese women and American men.

It was easy for Amerasian children to immigrate if their American parent sponsored them.

But many Amerasians don't know their father's name or have no contact. So Congress made it easier for Amerasians to immigrate from areas where U.S. servicemen were based.

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A 1982 act enabled **Amerasians** in Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos or Korea to immigrate if they proved they had an American parent and a sponsor.

The 1987 Homecoming Act made immigration easier by accepting physical appearance and testimony to prove American parentage.

Neither law covers **Amerasians** born in Japan or the Philippines, an omission some **Amerasians** view as unfair.

Amerasian immigration **Amerasians** and family members admitted to the USA annually since 1988:

#### Family

FY	<b><u>Amerasians</u></b>	members
'88	115	123
'89	2,825	6,900
'90	4,056	11,091
'91	4,913	12,807
'92	4,331	13,936

Source: U.S. State Department

## Notes

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IMMIGRATION; See info boxes at end of text

## Graphic

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