

LOST AND FOUND - A NEW HOMELAND

The roles and characteristics of the 1.5 Generation
By Tuong Quang Luu, AO. *

A few years ago, unbeknown to me that the term One-And-A-Half Generation had been used by some prominent American academics (1), I suggested that those belonging to this group in the Australian-Vietnamese community served a unique role of a transitional generation i.e. a link between the first and second generations of people of Vietnamese origin, living in a resettlement country like Australia.

I thought that this group of young men and women who had come to Australia as young boys and girls in their early teens with their families possessed a set of characteristics quite different from their adult relatives (the first generation) or their younger siblings who were Australian-born (the second generation).

In Australia, the resettlement process of the Vietnamese first generation has received a variety of study and research either by locations or nationwide on the basis of the Census data on population and housing in Australia. Apart from their educational performance through the secondary and tertiary levels, research on the Vietnamese second generation remains limited, given that the Vietnamese community did not exist in a significant number prior to 1975 (2). Much less has been known of the transitional 1.5 generation because statistically they were counted as part of the first generation while in terms of life experience they were much closer to the second generation with a good link to the first.

In fact, I do not think that there would be much difference between 5-year old children who were overseas-born at the time of arrival in Australia and Australian-born

children (the second generation). This view is based on my observation of my own children as a father. My Saigon-born daughter, who was 5 years old when she came to Australia, and my Canberra-born daughter had no discernible difference when they grew up together while their cousins, who were in their teens when they left Vietnam, went through a somewhat different experience.

It would appear that, at least in Australia, the 1.5 generation has not been formally identified in quantitative terms and their resettlement process analysed. Empirically - and unavoidably in a selective manner - there are enough anecdotes and examples to draw some tentative conclusions.

Nguyen Van Than began his life in Australia as a Year 9 student at Cabramatta Public High School in New South Wales. He went on to university and after graduating in Arts/Law and obtaining his first Masters degree, pursued his intellectual interest for an MBA. A solicitor with a busy practice, he spent part of his time in community work as vice-president and then president of the Vietnamese Community in Australia (NSW Chapter). Tran Huong Thuy landed at Sydney Airport with her Vietnamese refugee family as a totally bewildered 15-year-old girl. Now she runs a successful accounting business and shares her time earning a living and working for the community as president of the Vietnamese Community in Wollongong NSW. Tran Binh Dong enjoyed his teenage years with high school students from various backgrounds in Adelaide and is now a well-known Vietnamese-born psychiatrist in Australia. In a similar circumstance in South Australia,

Tran Duy Cuong rose to the challenges of scientific research for the health benefits of all Australians and for society. He won an Australian-American Fellowship award to conduct further study in the United States. The Melbourne-based online retailer wishlist.com.au, which was set up by a brother and sister team is a business success story by the younger Vietnamese-born members of the Truong family. These people all came to Australia in their teens, and now in their late twenties, or thirty something, their roles have become more pronounced in many aspects.

The list could go on to include, in particular, many young men and women who came to Australia in their adolescence from Vietnam and who are now giving a distinct dimension to the cultural and artistic expression of the Australian society, such as Tony Le Nguyen and Chi Vu (in film making and stage) in Melbourne, and Khoa Do (in film making), La Thao Nhi and My Le Thi (in painting) in Sydney etc... Of course, on the other end of the equation, there are always those who failed to live up to the hope of their family or the expectation of the host community.

So what are the roles and characteristics of the 1.5 Generation?

The Vietnamese experience in Australia and other resettlement countries is not unique, but it is certainly different from the process experienced by other migrant groups such as the Greek or Italian community. In some ways, the Vietnamese may be closer to the Cubans in the United States than the Chinese in Australia, in that both share a similar set of characteristics of a refugee community from a Communist regime with a strong desire to see changes in their country of birth. This is a relevant factor in the interactions between the first, the 1.5 and the second generations in the Vietnamese community.

In this contextual basis, the 1.5 generation

enjoyed part of their formative years in Vietnam, and are therefore more inclined to understand the feelings and hard experience of their elder generation. Most adult Vietnamese were affected one way or the other by the first and/or the second Vietnam War from 1945 to 1975. Few escaped the scar of hostilities, many were personally involved or could have relatives involved on both sides of the conflict. Most of them were further traumatised because of the post-1975 hard treatment and life in re-education camps in the Communist-controlled reunified Vietnam. In Australia, their already battered life was further affected by the perilous journey of escape - an experience which members of the 1.5 generation may still remember and relate to. The second generation has no personal knowledge of these life experiences.

Like the previous waves of post-war refugees from Europe - technically known as D.P's (displaced people) - the Vietnamese went through their first stage of resettlement with great difficulty economically and socially. Generally of a low level of English fluency and with their overseas qualifications unrecognised, most of them ended up working in factories at the lowest starting point (3). Socially, they were in isolation as social status upward movement tends to be slower and cannot normally be achieved without some economic improvements. The 1.5 generation took part in this early process as witnesses and beneficiaries, because they were the primary reason and hope for which their adult relatives started a new life. Those who had to work to pay their way through senior high school and university and to lessen their family burden, shared the work ethics of their adult relatives. The second generation in general came into existence when this initial hardship became more manageable or overcome.

Culturally, the 1.5 generation is much closer

to the first generation than the second generation can ever be, because of their bi-lingual capacity and shared life experience. In their teens, they do not lose their mother tongue while they can still absorb new linguistic skills without undue difficulty - a barrier their parents found unsurmountable. More often than not, the 1.5 generation is the practical link between the first generation and the outside world, thanks to their bi-lingual communication. The second generation may still become bi-lingual with great effort, but the first generation that did not speak English at the point of entry, could not normally be fluent in both languages.

Conversely, the 1.5 generation is much closer to the second generation than the first could ever be. There is always a generational gap between the first and second generations, regardless of cultural and linguistic backgrounds in the same way as the older and younger generations within 'mainstream' Australia. But for a largely refugee community like the Vietnamese, this generational gap becomes more accentuated because older Vietnamese Australians want not only to adhere to but also to pass on their tradition and heritage which may not be always seen as suitable by the younger ones in a different cultural environment. Inter-generational tension exists and has been amply reflected in films and plays. It can, however, be cushioned by the 1.5 generation, because this transitional generation can and does embrace both cultures. It is often said that migrants enjoy the best part of both worlds, but in reality they may belong to neither. They may never feel completely at home in their country of resettlement and they may find themselves a stranger in their country of birth upon return. The first generation has 'lost' one country and is yet to find a new one.

The Australian-born second generation grows up knowing only Australia or at least they do not feel attached to their parents'

country of origin to the same level they feel for their own country of birth. My Canberra-born daughter had never known Vietnam, but she fell in love with it instantly once she landed at Saigon international airport. After a few weeks travelling the length of the country, however, she was yearning to be back home. The second generation has neither lost a country nor found a new one - they were born into it.

Only the 1.5 generation can lose one country and find a new one. Their transitional position is useful not only as a cultural and social link between the first and second generations, but also important in projecting the Vietnamese-Australian identity and profile - as opposed to the Vietnamese or Australian - in this linguistically diverse and culturally rich society. Their roles and characteristics deserve to be further studied in both qualitative and quantitative terms.

Notes:

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(1) Ruben G. Rumbaut, 'The One-And-A-Half Generation: Crisis, Commitment and Identity' (May 1976). [Paper presented at the annual meeting of The American Society for Adolescent Psychiatry, Miami Beach, Florida, USA.]

(2) DIMIA, 'Second Generation Australians' - Report for The Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, by Siew Ean-Khoo, Peter McDonald and Dimi Giorgas, Australian Centre for Population Research, ANU, Canberra, and Bob Birrell, Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University, Melbourne, April 2002.

(3) DIMA (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs) - Community Profiles (1996 Census): Vietnam Born, Canberra, 2000.