

SOUTHEAST ASIANS IN AMERICA

Someone once said that if we really want to know someone we must walk a mile in that person's shoes. I never knew the amount of truth in this statement until I witnessed groups of Southeast Asians trying to get in their new "American shoes." This scene is very touching and often surprising for me to witness. The Southeast Asians struggle very hard to fit in with America and all its strata of society and culture.

Although the Southeast Asians strive very hard to acclimate to this new way of life, one can still observe a desire to keep the memories of the past alive. These memories are not comprised only of major events in their lives, but also included are the trivial things that manifest themselves in every person's day-to-day life. To the Southeast Asian, memories are vital in the preservation of a way, and a place in life that they may never be able to experience again. I draw these conclusions through observing these new Americans engaged in many different situations. These situations range from community celebrations to home and business life.

This past we talk about when referring to Southeast Asians is divided into three phases for those who are at least twenty years old. The first phase represents the Southeast Asian lifestyle experienced before the communist occupation of these countries. The second phase is the refugee relocation camp experience. This phase lasts much longer in time for some than others. We can never measure the amount of distress experienced by any of these people who were morally forced to enter these camps. The third phase is the Southeast Asian emergence into life and freedom in the United States.

These phases or transitions in the Southeast Asian life appear as a series of hurdles. The first one is not so difficult but then one must conquer the other two to be able to win. These obstacles in the Southeast Asian life seem to only strengthen and harden their personalities to make them strive to succeed and fit in in America though they are faced with many forms of adversity.

In Bowling Green, the Western Kentucky Refugee Mutual Assistance Society, Inc. acts as a base for all Southeast Asians to gain independence and adjustment counselling. The Society provides English classes, transportation, job counselling and development, and encourages the preservation of culture and tradition.¹ By speaking with and observing the patrons of the Society I was aware of how dependant and also how thankful these new Americans are upon the Society's existence.²

Throughout the duration of this project of documenting the life of the Southeast Asian in Bowling Green, my attempts to befriend the society and its members have been ignored or all together forgotten. I must admit that I felt very frustrated and used after I spent valuable time and money helping arrange and set up for the Cambodian/Laotian New Year Celebration. But aside from these failures I realized that what I ^{wanted} wasn't as important to them as is their success in learning how to live in America. In their own opinion, their past just did not seem relevent to what they must learn to cope with in the future.

I claim the previous opinion through two cases in point. In a conversation with Hung Trinh, I asked him about a what his everyday life was like in Viet Nam. He simply implied that

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there was no great difference and things were much the same here. He wanted to give no other explanation. All I needed to know was that he is "very Americanized" now and that he owns a house and a business. Case in point two concerns Many Vanh, A new American from Laos. In a lengthy interview, she informed me in many subjects of interest concerning both her new and old style of life. Many Vanh, not unlike Mr. Trinh, wants to put her past to rest. She still abides by many of her countries customs, but earnestly proclaims her love for America and her new style of life.

I kept up my attempts to interview and was repeatedly stood up or again forgotten about all together. I then resorted to the phone book and found an asian market called Firstasia. At Firstasia I talked with Many Vanh and Kham Phao, a married couple originally from a small city in Laos called Par Sak. For almost two years they have owned and operated Firstasia. I met them on April sixth and begged for an interview. They both seemed interested. Kham Phao would be busy so Many Vanh asked me to come back Friday afternoon to do the interview. We talked on for a while about a few trivial things and became better acquainted. Our intertview would be based on home and family life in both Laos and the United States.

On April seventh, ninteen eighty-nine I interviewed Many Vanh about her life. The interview took place in her and her husband's grocery. Many Vanh and I were situated around the counter; she as a proprieter and I as a customer in search of a product. Kham Phao, Her husband, was busy in the back of the store while their little girl Judy wandered from parent to parent.

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In our interview I had trouble understanding the pronunciation of her words. She also had some trouble with my thick southern accent. We were both very patient and helped one another to understand. This cooperation made us both feel more at ease. I felt she was probably accustomed to talking with people who are somewhat apprehensive in talking to someone whose lives have emerged so very differently. Often this one sided ignorance on our part is what alienates the Southeast Asian from a comfortable niche in American society.

As I stated earlier, a Southeast Asian immigrant must travel three phases. Many Vanh and her immediate family are not exceptions. The first phase in her life paints a relatively familiar picture. Many Vanh was born October seventeenth, nineteen sixty-three in Par Sak, Laos. She lived with her parents and six brothers and sisters in a modest middle class neighborhood. In Laos Many Vanh had completed her high school education and attended a school where she studied to be a nurse. After school she worked in a local hospital as a trauma nurse. She married Kham Phoa in nineteen eighty-one.³

The above description all seem very normal and yes, even American. But the reality is much different when put in the context of a Laotian city and a country under communist rule. The reality is that very few people have jobs that enable them to support a family. Jobs are obtained by family connections. If a relative works for the government, or a factory then they in turn are able to get jobs for other family members. Many Vanh was able to get a nursing job only because her cousin is a doctor at the hospital.⁴

Many Vanh's family is large. She has four brothers and sisters. Her father, a former governmental employee, now does nothing but sew clothes. Her mother is a house wife and takes complete care of the family. Most families in Laos are this large according to Many Vanh. She says that contraceptives are very difficult to obtain, and when available are very expensive. Therefore most couples do not use any method of birth control. Medicine and medical costs are all socialized in Laos. There is no cost for any type of medical treatment. Many Vanh believes that this is why people are able to have so many children without having money. In the United States, she relates, it costs too much money to have children. However, this does not change her mind about having a large family.⁵

Many Vanh recalls fond memories of her home and family life. Her family was middle class and lived comfortably in a small house located in a subdivision. Her house is very much like any we have here in the United States. She describes the house as wood with a second story or attic. The yard was landscaped with flowers and shrubry. The Vanhs also had a garden in which they grew much of their own food year round. The climate in Laos is tropical and allows vegetation continually throughout the year. The Vanh garden produced green onions, cabbage, cauliflower, eggplant and ginger.⁶

The garden produced food that otherwise would be quite costly if purchased in a market. Many Vanh told of a Laotian supermarket. The food is expensive and the atmosphere less formalized when compared with the markets in the United States. There are no cash registers, or "check out machines" as she calls them. The products are pick and pay. Other types of stores such as cloth-

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ing and department stores carried a great selection of goods. Clothing was very expensive. The stores did have well made merchandise. There were no sales or specials and clothing styles did not change very drastically over time.⁷

Transportation in Par Sak was much like any other place in the world. Most people did not own cars because for most this was economically impossible. Most people, according to Many Vanh, traveled by bus or boat. Par Sak is surrounded by a body of water. Buses were available to take residents almost anywhere they needed to go. People with money to spare could afford cars, but this was considered an extravagance or show of money. Many Vanh knew very few people who owned cars.⁸

In 1981, while still in Laos, Many Vanh married Kham Phao. While talking of her own courtship and marriage ceremony Many Vanh shared with me more Laotian Mating customs and celebrations. Marriage in Laos is a very important occasion. It is the permanent union of two people. Young single couples are not allowed to go out alone together. They must be accompanied at all times by a member of the pairs' family. When the relationship reaches the matrimonial phase the prospective couple must rely on the sets of both parents to agree to their union. The consent of the parents is very important to the couple so the family will continue to function and operate as the force that it has maintained over the centuries.

When the families have consented to the union of the couple the groom must offer the father of the bride a dowry or bride price. For the marriage to happen the groom must offer the right amount before the father will allow the plans to be made. The bride price can be paid in money, gold, land or merchandise.

Many Vanh did not disclose how much Kham Phao paid her father. The price varies from family to family. The price she said, ranges from 5,000 to 100,000 dollars. I believe these figures are in American dollars. In Laotian currency the numbers would be considerably higher.

When the arrangements are settled the couple writes letters to all their friends and relatives inviting them to join together and celebrate their marriage vows. The traditional ceremony includes an animal sacrifice to Buddha and prayer in the Temple. The celebration afterwards is a great feast and party involving all friends and relatives. When the marriage of a child takes place they are then given permission to leave the family home and live on their own. No matter what age, the unmarried child must live at home.⁹

Kham Phao and Many Vanh left Laos a short while after their marriage. This brings the Southeast Asian experience to the second phase, the refugee camp in Thailand.

The refugee camp experience for the people of Southeast Asia is but another hurdle they must cross on the track to freedom. The camps, along the eastern border of Thailand, are filled with people who have chosen to escape from communist atrocities and suppression. The people and families in these camps are forced to live in conditions worse than those they left behind. The length of residence in the camps is varied for every individual. Refugees must be sponsored by countries or individuals to ensure their transportation out of Thailand.¹⁰

The documentary film Situation Zero, gives an accurate picture of refugee camp life according to Samouth Koam. Koam obtained this film to demonstrate to others the continued strife

campresidents suffer through. I encountered the film at the Cambodian/Laotian New Year celebration. This event was sponsored by the Refugee Assistance Society and each Southeast Asian countries local association.¹¹

The relocation camp experience for Many Vanh and Kham Phao was very short compared to many others who fled their country. They sold most of their possessions before fleeing to Thailand so they would have money to bribe guards and suppliers. The couple spent only two months in the camp before they were sponsored. Vanh tells that their stay was hard and she had difficulty obtain-enough food and water for she and her husband to survive. The couple spent 5,000 dollars to get out of the camp along with the help of Dr. Kenneth Deputy and his wife Martha (Marty). From Thailand Many Vanh and Kham Phao were sent to the Phillipines where they would attend school. There they were taught English and briefed on life in America. They spent eight months in the Phillipines before being relocated to Columbus, Ohio.¹² There they decided to move to Kentucky and make their home in Bowling Green.

According to Kham Phao they were very lucky to have been sponsored so soon. Many of the Southeast Asians in Bowling Green have spent years in these ^{CAMPS} in hope of either being sponsored or going home. Phao says many Southeast Asians in the United States save money to help bring their family out of the camps.¹³ Many Vanh is very proud of the fact that she was able to sponsor her brother and his family. She paid their passage and other expenses to come to the United States. Vanh's brother, his wife and their child have lived in a Thai camp for over three years. For the last nine months they have been in

Thailand attending the American school. Kham Phao in a recent conversation, told me that his brother-in-law and his family have now been in Bowling Green for about ten days. He says that they are all very scared and sick. Apparently they are having trouble adjusting to both our food and water. I guess that right now America seems like another hurdle added to the already bumpy road they have travelled.

The last phase of the Southeast Asian experience is the emergence into America and its strata of society. The Southeast Asians' arrival into the United States bring both relief and fear. Culture shock is felt on the part of the Southeast Asian and the American community in which they live. For many Bowling Greenians this shock of another culture never ceases. But for the new American a process of naturalization is set in motion. Although they are faced with barriers and hostilities they carry on and strive to succeed in their new home.

Many Vanh has adjusted very well in her own opinion. She does not agree with all American customs and sticks firmly to many of her own countries beliefs. She doesn't speak of any regrets about their decision to come to America. But when asked if she would ever return to Laos she emphatically answers YES! But the government and living conditions must change for her to move her family back to their homeland.

It is very easy to see that Many Vanh wants to keep her culture alive. This desire is not only for her children but also for the people who are suffering under the suppression of another culture.

In our interview I asked about her home, both here and in Laos. When her answer was about America the next phrase after

this was always, "but in my country" and then a description to what she was refering. Every day life in the United States follows pattern as it did in Laos. But in Bowling Green Many Vanh has a car and an apartment with all the modern conviences a young woman could want. Every morning she gets up with her baby and puts the rice on to cook in the rice cooker. Judy, her daughter goes to playschool and the baby goes to the sitter. Kham Phao Goes to one of his three jobs and Many Vanh does her household duties. In the afternoon, for six days a week , she works in the market and takes care of Judy after playschool.¹⁵ This type of day sounds very familiar to most American women.

Many Vanh did not describe a typical day in the life of a Laotion housewife. But with the information she did give me I have constructed a day around the tasks that must be done. She wakes up very early to feed the children and see that the older ones get off to school. They must catch a series of buses to their schools location across the city. By the time they leave the husband arises and gets ready for his job in the factory. During the day she tends to the small children since there is no money for sitters or playschool. The clothes must all be washed (by hand) and hung out to dry. The morning is gone and the afternoon brings the job of cleaning the house. All the floors and mats must be swept and beaten to keep them fresh and free from odor. The gardens harvest of the day must be stored and prepared for future use. The children return from school and do their small chores and help with the preparation of the evening meal. Father comes home and dinner is served. And then after the dishes are completed and the children put to bed SHE finally has some time to herself.

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Kham Phao and Many Vanh's children were both born in the United States. Judy, the five year old, loves coke, spaghetios, and chocolate, things that her mother never had because American things and people were bad. The family speaks Laotian at home. Kham and Many Vanh hope to raise their children with the same values and customs that were taught to them in their youth. These parents know this will be one hard task to do since the children are bombarded with American culture more and more every day.

I don't know what else can be said about the Southeast Asian experience in America. I can however give you a glimpse at the kindness I witnessed. Kham Phao asked me to help him with some business matters in his store. My friend Lisa and I went to help how we could. While there we also shopped for items we needed to cook with. Kham helped us find what we needed. On the way out we spotted some cookies we had missed in our search. Lisa commented that they were very good. Kham then told us to each take a package. He explained that in Laos the shopkeepers often gave merchandise to their good friends. I went out of the store feeling much better about this project and knew I had done my best. After all I had made two "new American " friends.

ENDNOTES

- 1 From Cambodian/Laotian New Years program.
- 2 Observation from field experience noted in journal.
- 3 Interview with Many Vanh, April 7, 1989. Index 077-089.
- 4 Ibid. Index 040-055.
- 5 Ibid. Index 089-103.
- 6 Ibid. Index 306-320.
- 7 Ibid. Index 000-034 (side 2).
- 8 Ibid. Index 034-070 (side 2).
- 9 Ibid. Index 150-208 (side 2).
- 10 Conversation with Martha Deputy noted in journal.
- 11 Conversation with Samouth Koam April 1, 1989.
- 12 Interview with Many Vanh, April 7, 1989. Index 030-040 (tape 1).
- 13 Conversation with Kham Phao noted in journal.
- 14 Ibid. Journal.
- 15 Interview with Many Vanh, April 7, 1989. Index 050-053 (tape 1 side 2).

FIELD JOURNAL

- Jan 24, 1989 Looked in film library for films dealing with the refugee experience. I found it hard to find just what I was looking for. However, I did compile a list of about twenty films.
- Feb 14 Marty Deputy came to class to discuss the Society to us and give us an idea of the size of the Southeast Asian community in B.G. Samouth Koam also came and told us what to expect in our interviews. He said many people were very depressed and still angry about the situation in their countries. Said that many may become emotional and cry.
- Feb. 17 Went to Refugee Asst. Center to meet and talk with Mrs. Deputy to see if she could help me set up some interviews. She told me to call her later and she would see what she could dig up. She had take someone to the doctor in Nashville.
- Feb.21 Called Mrs. Deputy at Center to ask her about interviews again. She said she would call me back with some names. She then suggested that I come down to the center to do some work like filing and answering the phone.
- Mar. 14 Called center again there was no one there to help me. I called again in the afternoon Marty told me to wait and to talk to Thorn Sun. He would set up some interviews with people who would talk.
- Mar. 22 Went to center to meet with Thorn Sun. He told me to come back Fri. at 9:00 and he would have two interviews set up for me. He said two women were willing to talk to me.
- Mar. 24 Went to assistance center no one knew about anything. Thorn had gone to L-ville. Marty gave me names of some women to call. I stayed and helped her answer the phone and do some mailings. I also agreed to help out with the New year celebration on Sat. I think I sold my soul to the devil.
- Mar.29 Called assistance center. Marty wants me to call the Jr. High for her to see if they can use the display case for Sat. night. None of the women she gave me could speak English and were not receptive to the idea of talking to a stranger about their past.
- Apr.1 Bought four potted plants for the celebration tonight. Went to the Jr. High at 2:00 to help with the set up and decoration of the stage.

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Apr. 1 (cont.) I talked to several different people and met some of the other people involved with the Asst. Center. I arranged two large pots of cut flowers and helped with the sound system and set up of the video system. I put up flags and back drops, set up tables and the display case at the entrance. I got a chance to talk to Marty about what she does and how she got involved in this. She told me about the conditions that must be met for a refugee to come into the United States and how most people react when they arrive.

Apr. 6 I went to Firstasia market to see if I could interview the owners of the store. Many Vanh and Kham Phao were interested and we talked about how long they had been here. We also talked a little about what their life was like in Laos. Many Vanh told me to come back tomorrow and she would be able to talk with me at length. I told her that I just wanted her to tell me about what every day life was like for her in Laos and in the United States.

Apr. 7 I interviewed Many Vanh for almost two hours. She was very easy to talk to but still had some trouble with English so I had to help her look for words, and explain much of what I asked. She had to ask her husband to clear up some things for her. I learned a lot and also felt that I liked this person very much. I have a great deal of respect for her and her husband. They took a chance and went looking for a better life to raise children in. They seem to be very happy.

Apr. 27 Kham Phao asked me to come and help with some type of business that he wanted to begin in B.G. I took Lisa with me to let her see what a complete little market they have. It really is exceptional for B.G. We helped Kham and the shoppped a little and bought the things we needed to cook with. We bought a lot and then on the way out we spotted some cookies we had missed. Lisa had had some before and said they were good. Kham told us to both to take a package. He looked at me and said that in Laos storekeepers give their friends things all the time. That made me feel really good. We also talked about Many Vanh's brother who had just arrived from The Phillipines with his family. Kham said they were really scared and sick from such a drastic change and the difference in the food and water.