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VIETNAMESE DIASPORA IN AMERICA

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The South Vietnamese Flag and Shifting Representations of the Vietnamese American Experience

*The sight of the South Vietnamese flag in Washington, D.C. on January 6, 2021 has aroused curiosity and criticism. Missing in the commentaries, however, is the multiplicity of its symbolism to Vietnamese Americans who had come to the United States as refugees or immigrants. Although its visual symbolism is forever tied to the history of the former Republic of Vietnam, its underlying meaning has changed to reflect the experience of Vietnamese **after** the fall of Saigon, not before.*

The Republic of Vietnam (RVN) ceased to exist forty-six years ago, yet its flag still flutters in American cities and many other locales among the Vietnamese diaspora. The main reason for its visibility in the United States is the fact that the majority of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants had political, military, educational,

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and historical roots to the extinct state. It is therefore tempting to think that this flag stands for nostalgia for the RVN. This notion, however, is misleading if not also mistaken. Among the diaspora and even people in Vietnam, there has been nostalgia for many things such as the culture, politics, and society in South Vietnam, especially republican Saigon. Evidence, however, indicates that the symbolism of the RVN flag has shifted over the four-and-a-half decades of postwar Vietnamese presence in the United States.

One reason for this shift had to do with the differences between the initial waves of refugees on the one hand, and the subsequent waves of immigrants, on the other. The refugees, especially those who came to the United States in 1975, carried fresh memories of South Vietnam. Early diasporic production of literature and music, for instance, included countless references to the land and life now lost to the communists. This experience, however, became more complicated as boat people began to arrive to American shores. The boat people lived through some of the harshest experiences of their lives: in Vietnam, at sea, even in refugee camps. Like the 1975 refugees, they longed for a return to Vietnam someday, but they also knew that life in postwar Vietnam was still extremely difficult. By the time that Vietnamese migrated legally *en masse* to America—in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s—they carried with them their experience of poverty, incarceration, and other personal and collective upheavals.

It is undeniable that the visual symbolism of the RVN flag is forever tied to the name of the South Vietnamese state. At the same time, however, it behooves the historian to be attentive to the shifting symbolism of this flag as a reflection of the postwar experience. It is especially easy to overlook the shifting symbolism after the appearance of this flag at the rally-turned-riot in Washington, D.C. on January 6,

2021. Carried by Vietnamese American supporters of Donald Trump, the flag has been interpreted to be, again, nostalgia of a certain kind.¹ This view, however, misses out the long and complex history about the place of the flag in the Vietnamese diaspora, especially in the United States. In the hope for a more historically informed perspective, I wish to offer a sketch about the two main waves of Vietnamese immigration alongside the history of the flag's presence in American society.



Vietnamese immigrants parading the flag of the Republic of Vietnam during the Tet festival at a North American Little Saigon. Image, by the courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, is in the public domain.

¹ See, for example, Viet Thanh Nguyen, “There’s a reason the South Vietnamese flag flew during the Capitol riot,” *Washington Post*, January 14, 2021.

The Flag and the Refugee Waves

Designed to represent the three regions of Vietnam, the RVN flag was, ironically, not all that visible in the United States during the war even though the country was by far the biggest supporter of South Vietnam. Its visibility was limited even after the fall of Saigon, when tens of thousands of refugees came to American shores. They came with sorrow and anxiety over national loss and family separation. They also believed that the United States had betrayed South Vietnam by abandoning it during the worst hours. They further found American society wealthy yet too materialistic and individualistic. This combination led them to see both American government and society with considerable ambivalence. Their hearts continued to belong to the fallen RVN and they dreamed of restoring the lost republic someday. During the 1980s, indeed, some of them supported an armed movement called Mặt Trận (The Front) that sought to fight the Vietnamese government and opened a small camp in the jungles of the Thailand-Laos border. In this context of loss and exile, the political meaning of the South Vietnamese flag was heightened and central to the political identity among the refugees in the 1970s and 1980s.

In addition, the Vietnamese government was actively and rapidly erasing their history. It banned, for instance, most of the music produced in South Vietnam. It confiscated and destroyed countless books and periodicals from the South Vietnamese press. In the United States, there was hardly any representation or recognition of their war experience. Left with precious few resources to keep alive their identity and memory, the refugees endowed further exilic, political, and cultural meanings upon the South Vietnamese flag. It appeared at ethnic events such as Lunar New Year's celebrations and annual



commemorations of the fall of Saigon. It showed up in diasporic productions such as music videos, magazines, and book-covers. For the most part, its visibility was confined to refugee communities. Now and then, it could be seen at events organized by non-Vietnamese, especially human rights events. This appearance, however, was the exception rather than the rule.

During the 1980s, the worsening economic, political, and societal situation in Vietnam also contributed to more positive views about American government and society. Similar to Americans on the right, many among the first generation took the blame of losing the war off the White House and placed it instead on a “cowardly” Congress and the “liberal” American media. The end of the Cold War led to an American triumphalism that empowered the anticommunist ideology among the first generation of Vietnamese Americans. They no longer dreamed of armed struggle but, instead, of the overthrow of Vietnamese communism from within in the future.

The final years of the Cold War further coincided with the beginning of a new phase of Vietnamese immigration to the United States. Starting in the late 1980s and especially during the first half of the 1990s, tens of thousands of Vietnamese came to the United States through one or another form of legal migration. Some came under the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) that was created by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Out of ODP, many migrated under family reunification while others did as former employees of the United States in South Vietnam. Most notable were tens of thousands of former political prisoners and their families who came to America through the program Humanitarian Operation. In addition were Americans and their family members, who came after Congress passed the Americans Homecoming Act.

The Immigrant Waves and New Meanings of the Flag

If Vietnamese American communities were established by the refugees of the 1970s and 1980s, new arrivals during the 1990s injected fresh energy into these communities, especially political energy in the form of anticommunist protests. Many of the new arrivals, mainly those who had been incarcerated in postwar reeducation camps, were in the forefront of the opposition from different Little Saigon communities against the Vietnamese government. They included protests against cultural events with participants from Vietnam, protests against ethnic businesses believed to have benefited from transactions with Vietnam, and overall opposition against U.S. rapprochement with Vietnam.

It was only one side of the experience. Another side was the commemoration of their war *as well as* postwar experiences. Along with the former refugees, they actively participated in fundraising for and construction of memorials, statues, libraries, and other forms of historical preservation of their difficult and complex history. They also wrote and published many memoirs about their postwar experiences, especially on incarceration in Vietnam and, later, adaptation to American society. Such developments led to greater visibility of the South Vietnamese flag since the 1990s, both inside and outside of the ethnic communities.

A prime example comes from the Little Saigon community in Orange County, California, which has been the largest Vietnamese community outside of Vietnam. During the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, I lived in other states and visited Little Saigon a number of times. I have also lived near it since 2008. Out of this experience and research about Vietnamese refugees, I could testify to the growing



visibility of the flag in the last quarter-century. Its presence at anti communist protests in Little Saigon was entirely expected. But it could be seen also at many concerts, fundraisers, reunions, and funerals. It has continued to stand for many things about the identity of Vietnamese American communities, including but not exclusively their political identity.

The ubiquitous and confident presence of the flag coincided with the construction of memorialization among Vietnamese communities. Most of them, including the Vietnam War Memorial at the Sid Goldstein Freedom Park and a small museum about the South Vietnamese military in Orange County's Little Saigon, have to do with remembering the Vietnam War. But others are squarely about the postwar experience. One example is the Vietnamese Boat People Memorial which is only two kilometers from the war memorial. A different example is an annual summer concert to raise funds for disabled and former soldiers of the South Vietnamese military who have lived in poverty since the end of the war. They might have reminisced with one another about life in the RVN, but they reminisced more about the shared experience of reeducation camps and family separation. They came to see the flag as a representation of freedom standing in contrast to repression and oppression during the fifteen years after the war had ended.

In growing frequency, the flag also appeared at non-ethnic events such as interracial religious ceremonies and local and regional parades. A number of municipal governments have recognized the flag as a symbol of Vietnamese American identity. It has been visible at city halls, community centers, schools, parks, and other public spaces beyond Little Saigon communities. One outcome of these developments is that many second-generation Vietnamese, especially those from

large Vietnamese communities, have come to view it as their “heritage flag” or “heritage and freedom flag.” In 2004, for example, the General Assembly of Virginia, a state with a large Vietnamese population, approved a small amendment about the flag to the Code of Virginia. The amendment specifies that the flag “symbolizes freedom and democracy and represents the cultural heritage of Vietnamese-Americans.”²

Or, eleven years later, the Seattle City Council passed a resolution to recognize the flag as the symbol of the Vietnamese community in Seattle. A second-generation Vietnamese American, who was born in Washington State, wrote that “forty years after the City Council first signed resolutions welcoming Vietnamese refugees, it’s about time this community’s turbulent history is acknowledged.” One aspect of this history was the reaction among survivors of incarceration and other post war trauma, for whom “the communist regime’s official red flag with a yellow star in the middle elicits anger and a profound sense of loss.”³ In northern California, the cities of San Jose and Milpitas went further to ban public display of the current Vietnamese flag. The ban supported the argument that the Socialist Republic of Vietnam flag could cause traumatizing effects for Vietnamese who escaped the postwar regime.⁴ In other words, advocates for the visibility of the flag have thought less about the lost republic that existed during 1955–1975 and more about the terrible experience

² “Code of Virginia,” § 2.2-3310.2. Vietnamese–American Heritage Flag, <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title2.2/chapter33/section2.2-3310.2/>.

³ Thanh Tan, “Recognizing the South Vietnamese flag is long overdue,” *Seattle Times*, June 24, 2015.

⁴ Aliyah Mohammed, “Milpitas council bans city’s display of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam flag,” *Mercury News*, September 22, 2017.

under, or associated with, the current republic after 1975.

Concluding Thoughts

Since January 6, 2021 there have been different reactions among Vietnamese Americans to the presence of the RVN flag during the storming of the Capitol in Washington, D.C. Some have expressed outrage at the usage of the flag for partisan purposes. Others have worried about a potential loss of esteem for both the flag and political involvement of Vietnamese Americans. Still, some Trump supporters have defended the flag's appearance on constitutional grounds, adding that there is no evidence of any Vietnamese Americans entering the Capitol building. This intra-ethnic debate about the future of the flag is still evolving. In the meantime, it behooves us to think about the symbolism of this flag alongside the history of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants, not apart from it. Like this history, the symbolism is never static but has evolved to contain multiple meanings.

Note on the Author

Tuan Hoang is Associate Professor of Great Books at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California, and an editorial board member of *Rising Asia Journal*. He received his PhD in history from University of Notre Dame in 2013 and, since then, has been teaching in the Great Books, History, and Humanities programs at Pepperdine. His research focuses on twentieth-century Vietnamese religious history and the history of Vietnamese Catholic refugees in the United States. His publications include "Ultramontanist, Nationalism, and the Fall of Saigon: Historicizing the Vietnamese American Catholic Experience," *American Catholic Studies* 130.1 (Spring 2019), and "From Reeducation

Camps to Little Saigons: Historicizing Vietnamese Diasporic Anticommunism,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11.2 (May 2016). His forthcoming works include a chapter about Vietnamese American perspectives on freedom for the edited volume *The Vietnamese Diaspora in a Transnational Context: Contested Spaces, Contested Narratives* (Brill), and a chapter on the Vietnamese diaspora for the *Cambridge History of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge University Press).