



## Research Note

# Cultural Adaptation, Tradition, and Identity of Diasporic Vietnamese People

## A Case Study in Silicon Valley, California, USA

This research note examines cultural identity, adaptation, and cultural preservation among diasporic Vietnamese living in Silicon Valley, California. It emphasizes the fluid and changeable nature of cultural identity and explores how attitudes toward the change and preservation of traditional culture are shaped, in part, by variations in the experiences of U.S. Vietnamese. I examine inter-generational differences in identity and adaptation and explore attempts, mainly by elders within the community, to develop and maintain traditional culture. Finally, I present a case study of the Hùng Kings temple to illustrate how and why U.S. Vietnamese are trying to keep traditional culture alive while simultaneously changing and modifying to fit with the culture of their host country.

KEYWORDS: traditional culture—cultural identity—diasporic Vietnamese—immigration—adaptation

I FIRST LEARNED about traditional culture among diasporic Vietnamese in San Jose when I took part in a *Lên đồng* spiritual possession ritual in 2003 as a post-doctoral fellow at the University of California in Los Angeles, and then as part of my fieldwork for a project on transnational rituals in 2008 and 2009. Through these observations, and from many casual contacts with other informants of different ages, I learned that cultural identity and the traditional culture of Vietnamese people in the U.S. still shares many similarities with people living in contemporary Vietnam. This is true even though differences in political opinion still exist between Vietnamese living in the U.S. and Vietnam. How did the Vietnamese community in Silicon Valley adapt, transform, and preserve their traditional practices during immigration and resettlement? The aim of this research note is to understand how and why Vietnamese diasporic communities remain highly focused and directed in their daily social and cultural practices to the homeland culture.

This study is based on years of experience with Silicon Valley Vietnamese. The most recent data was collected through fieldwork in April 2015 among community members that organize traditional ceremonies at the Hùng Kings temple in San Jose. Since 2015, Mr. Đông (seventy-nine years old) has been the ritual master during the ceremony of the Death Anniversary of the Vietnamese Hùng Kings, who are the progenitors of the Vietnamese people. He replaced Mr. Bằng,<sup>1</sup> (eighty-four years old) who had performed as the ritual master for nearly ten years but had to retire due to health problems. I joined the training sessions in which Mr. Bằng prepared Mr. Đông for this role. I asked Mr. Đông, “Why did you accept the invitation to perform as the ritual master?” He answered, “Due to the Vietnamese cultural identity for our children and grandchildren, Ms. Hiền!” Mr. Đông’s statement demonstrates the great importance he assigned to his new role for keeping the heritage of this ritual alive and helping to maintain the cultural identity of the diasporic Vietnamese. I observed how the two men engaged in the training sessions. I contemplated why and how the diasporic Vietnamese community<sup>2</sup> in general, and in San Jose particular, have been trying to reestablish cultural traditions in the host country, especially in the U.S. where many other ethnic communities and cultural diversities exist.

I interviewed a number of Vietnamese Americans not only in Silicon Valley, but also overseas Vietnamese from San Jose who returned to Vietnam to visit rela-

tives, purchase objects for the purpose of worship, and gain greater experience with ritual practices and experiences in their homeland. Furthermore, I took part in the Death Anniversary of the Hùng Kings and interviewed three members from the Association of the Hùng Kings Temple. Mr. Liêm, Mrs. Bửu Đoàn, and Ms. Chinh all said that their mission is to introduce the worship of ancestors and the Kings, along with other customs and practices that originated in Vietnam, to Vietnamese Americans and other ethnic groups in the U.S. I have personally known some of the informants for more than ten years, which provided the opportunity to observe the process by which they established and practiced traditional culture over a long period of time.

Silicon Valley is a region of high-tech development. Many Vietnamese Americans are very busy with their work in big digital companies, but I still saw their *Vietnamized* life, especially for the first generation who immigrated in 1975 and the one and one-half generation (those who came to the U.S. as children or during their early teens). I interviewed informants of the first generation about their views, from different perspectives, of their social relationships and traditional practices. The second and third generations were born and raised in the U.S., many of them have never been to Vietnam, and they have only heard stories about their homeland from their parents. I observed them and their children in Vietnamese -language classes in Đức Viên Buddhist temple and talked to their teachers. The analysis that follows uses the data collected from all these interviews and observations, which enabled me to gain a better understanding of what I call the “in-between culture” of the Vietnamese Americans.

I will present a case study of the establishment and preservation of the Hùng Kings Temple. The first generation of Vietnamese who came to the U.S. established the temple, which they registered as an NGO with the state of California. The temple is open daily for visitors, and organizes four main rituals such as the Lunar New Year, the Anniversary ritual dedicated to the Trưng Sisters, the Anniversary of Hùng Kings, and the Anniversary of Trần Hưng Đạo. The temple meets the desires of the Vietnamese community to have a solemn space for worshipping their progenitors, and transmits traditional practices to future generations. This is expressed in the Vietnamese adage, “When drinking the water, remember its source.” This research note examines the activities of the members of the Association of Hùng Kings, particularly their efforts to preserve folk beliefs and instill a sense of cultural identity based on the homeland, to illustrate how important the preservation of traditional culture is to Vietnamese in Silicon Valley, California.

This work represents the unique view of a Vietnamese scholar who is interested in the cultural identities of the overseas Vietnamese and ways that the practice of traditional culture can contribute to the rapprochement and reconciliation of political and religious disagreements. Although many Vietnamese communities, especially those in Southern California, are known to be strongly anti-communist, this has not been the case concerning the spiritual practitioners I have worked with (see FJELSTAD and NGUYỄN Thanh Liêm 2011). For example, although members of the Hùng Kings Association are refugees, they say their interest in maintaining

Vietnamese cultural and religious traditions is far greater than their disdain for communism.

#### CULTURAL IDENTITY AMONG DIASPORIC VIETNAMESE

In this research note, I will emphasize cultural identity in the consciousness of the people, not merely on the surface of cultural expressions. Scholars of Vietnamese studies such as RAMBO (2005) and JAMIESON (2010) similarly perceive culture to include costume, language, art, and numerous tangible forms but also intangible cultural heritage. It is clear that the culture has changed very fast, yet, “Vietnamese culture as a system of values and meanings has undergone remarkably little change ... certain specifically Vietnamese patterns of thought and behavior have persisted for centuries” (RAMBO 2005, 50–51). When talking about the cultural identities of Vietnamese, Phan Ngọc said that cultural identity is “the unchangeable cultural aspect in the development process of history.... Culture comprises the system of relationships, and what creates the unchangeability of these systems is the need of the consciousness of Vietnamese people. These needs basically are the same for all people of different statuses and ages.” However, he also noted that, “each element such as Nation, Family, Fate, surely has changed in cultural expression due to the historical and living conditions, but acculturation is the result of the outside factors whereas the needs have not changed so much” (PHAN 1999, 32–33). Neil Jamieson states that cultural tendencies are “context-dependent to a significant degree. This may help to explain why although Vietnam has greatly changed over the past century and has changed very rapidly over the past twenty years, some very basic parts of Vietnamese culture have not changed as much as others.” According to Jamieson, while some cultural elements have changed according to context, others some still bear Vietnamese identity. “In what ways,” he asks, “does Vietnamese ethnic identity, or some particular version or component of it, remain Vietnamese ethnic identity?” (JAMIESON 2010, 480).

From 1985 to 1995, many scholars paid attention to Asian immigrants, and there has been a change in the discourse on adaptation and cultural identity. They no longer view culture as fundamental, unchangeable, and enclosed (CAMINO and KRULFELD 1994; EBIHARA, MORTLAND, and LEDGERWOOD 1994; FREEMAN 1989). Instead, this research shed light on how Vietnamese and other Asian cultures are dynamic, changeable, creative, and adaptive. These works also emphasize identity, which is not fixed and unchangeable, but instead is easily reinvented, modified, and negotiated in different contexts and situations. Scholars view identity as part of the dynamic processes of history, culture, society, economy, and politics (JAMIESON 2010; RAMBO 2005; HALL 1990). Recent studies of immigrants have also demonstrated the diversity and variety of adaptation among Vietnamese and other ethnic groups, and have shown that immigrants are not simply the victims of context, but people who have reconstructed their lives and identities creatively, and that their adaptations are not the same. As KOH notes, cultural identity among Vietnamese Americans “was relationally defined and emerged from dynamic processes of inter-

action and negotiation between *Việt Kiều*, locals and the state” (2012, 84). My research is in line with recent works that view identities as the result of a process of self-definition, the construction of symbolic boundaries, and the assignment of collective identities by others (CORNELL and HARTMANN 2007; PORTES and RUMBAUT 2001). For members of the Association of Hùng Kings, the preservation of traditional culture is viewed as a means of establishing their Vietnamese identity and community in the host country.

When studying the culture of the diasporic Vietnamese, only emphasizing adaptation and change provides an incomplete picture lacking depth into the deeper nature of the Vietnamese people and their culture. It is also important to examine aspects of culture that have not changed. Thus, to understand and interpret the expressions of culture and identity, this research note will not only examine the immigrating process to the U.S. and resettlement, but also the reconstruction of traditional practices that develop and preserve the core of a community with its own cultural identity. Importantly, these Vietnamese elements of Vietnamese American communities have never completely faded away (FREEMAN 1995; RUTLEDGE 1992).

#### THE VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY IN SILICON VALLEY

Silicon Valley is located in the western U.S. in the south of San Francisco Bay, California, and is famous for the IT industry. Silicon Valley has attracted a large population of Vietnamese Americans who now live and work there. According to the 2010 U.S. national census, more than 600,000 Vietnamese live in California (U.S. Census Bureau). Vietnamese Americans make up the fourth biggest Asian diasporic community in the United States, next to Chinese, Indian, and Filipino Americans.

The city of San Jose is located in the center of Silicon Valley. It is home to the second largest population of Vietnamese Americans (125,774 people), next to Los Angeles (271,234) (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). San Jose has a Little Saigon (formerly known as the Saigon Business District), which is similar to other U.S. cities with large populations of Vietnamese Americans.<sup>3</sup> Vietnamese businesses, shops, restaurants, and grocery stores characterize the neighborhood. The business district represents Vietnamese ways, styles, and culture. The Vietnamese community has also developed spaces for the practice of traditional culture such as the temple dedicated to Hùng Kings,<sup>4</sup> as well as more than ten temples dedicated to the spirits of the Mother Goddess Religion, and about thirty Buddhist temples, many of which have Vietnamese language centers. These neighborhoods play an important collective role for immigrants and contribute to their sense of belonging. They help to provide a support system that greatly contributes to the success of immigrants in adapting, adjusting, and resettling (FREEMAN 1995).

During the initial refugee movement to the United States, resettlement policies emphasized the dispersal of Vietnamese in order to “assimilate the new immigrants as soon as possible” (PHAM 1988, 25). These initial policies proved to be problematic and unrealistic (AGUILAR-SAN JUAN 2009; FREEMAN 1995; PHAM 1988). They

isolated newcomers who were unable to “receive the support from the Vietnamese who had come to the United States in the past” (PHAM 1988, 25). Consequently, there are Vietnamese refugees that “do not feel happy living in the United States” and some Americans “are surprised and sometimes angry that there still are many Vietnamese people who “have not been assimilated” (PHAM 1988, 29). In her book on the religious diversity of immigrants in the U.S., LEVITT states, “We expect newcomers to assimilate, becoming part of ‘our’ community by severing their ties to their homelands” (2007, 11), but Vietnamese history has proved that they do not assimilate, as seen in their response to one thousand years of Chinese domination. In fact, this history shows that Vietnamese inherently organize on the basis of kinship, family lines, friends, and colleagues to support each other in life as well as in work.

Very soon after initial resettlement Vietnamese refugees left the locations to which they were assigned to resettle in cities with other Vietnamese. A number of people did not know any English when they immigrated so they needed to live near other Vietnamese in order to be able to communicate and to practice their traditional culture. This is similar to members of the Chinese diaspora who, as I observed in a park in San Francisco in April 2015, gather in Buddhist temples, public parks, or front yards to engage in traditional practices such Tai Chi, play Mahjong, and share stories (see also TAN 2013). These practices are necessary to foster a sense of belonging. This explains the concentration of Vietnamese ethnic communities according to the U.S. Census of 2010 in cities such in Los Angeles, San Jose, Houston (103, 525 people) Dallas (71,839 people), Washington (58,768 people), and San Francisco (55,638 people). As Lê says, Vietnamese have a “tendency to cluster together and to form community organizations as sources of security” (cited in RUTLEDGE 1992, 60).

However, there are exceptions. Ms. Anh, a boat refugee, is the mother of two children that died during her immigration to the U.S. Her husband and eldest daughter were shot when a conflict arose with the boat owner, and her youngest son died of dehydration during the trip. Miserable after sacrificing such a great loss so she could live in the U.S., she chose to live an isolated life and rarely takes part in community events.<sup>5</sup> In other cases people turn to the community for support. For example, Ms. Binh has an Amerasian son who immigrated to Texas in 1990 as part of the American Homecoming Act, then invited his mother to live with him. By 2012 Ms. Binh had moved to San Jose and started to take care of the Hùng Kings temple and the temple dedicated to the Mother Goddesses. After meeting and talking to people who visit the temples, she quickly became part of the community, which caused her to be “full of joy and happiness.”

According to tradition, Vietnamese families take responsibility for their children’s education. Children and grandchildren are expected to work hard to obtain high educational degrees, and to major in subjects that lead to jobs with high salaries such as doctors, lawyers, dentists, business administrators, and marketing. Children who succeed as doctors or lawyers bring pride to their family and contribute to a higher status for the family as a whole. As such, they are the subject

of the first talks at meetings of family members, friends, and community or clan events.

As in other cities, Vietnamese in San Jose have different levels of education. A number have obtained university degrees and are engineers or experts who work in Silicon Valley. During the two to three decades since they left their homelands and moved to San Jose, many have become successful. There are, for example, Vietnamese police chiefs, IT engineers, and city officials. With their stable and high income, some people invest in the real estate business, share their capital, and purchase stocks. They also invest in Vietnamese restaurants—for example, the famous Lees Sandwiches and Phở Hòa Noodle Soup were first established in San Jose. Others open small businesses such as nail salons, hair salons, or spas. Their employees may not know English, often lack educational degrees or work experience, and commonly live with family. In general, the Vietnamese people in San Jose are dynamic and easily catch up with the fast developments of the high tech industries such as the cloud computing, the Internet of Things, and 3D printing (see more ANH Phi 2015; MẠNH Kim 2015). After forty years of hardship the Vietnamese communities in Silicon Valley have made considerable achievements. However, there are also people who are unable to work and live on welfare, requiring help with housing, food, and health care. Regardless of their employment status, many Vietnamese in Silicon Valley have been developing and reaffirming their traditional culture in their new country.

#### DIVERSITY AND IDENTITY

##### AMONG VIETNAMESE AMERICANS IN SILICON VALLEY

When leaving Vietnam to resettle in a foreign country, Vietnamese immigrants, like most other diasporic communities, never completely abandon their own culture. They take their culture with them wherever they settle, whether in China, Laos, Cambodia, or the U.S. Their habits, behavior, and etiquette become part of their lifestyle in the new country. They preserve traditions from their home country by transmitting this heritage to their children with the expectation that they will not abandon their roots. A number of scholars have shown that diasporic communities in the U.S. often change their cultural practices to integrate with the culture of the host country (MATTHEWS 1982; LEVITT 2007). Vietnamese who live in the U.S. also adjust their cultural practices in order to adapt to the dominant culture of the host country, while keeping their own traditional values as their core identity. Their engagement in traditional practices is demonstrated through their social relationships—in families, clans, and communities—and these relationships are characterized by a high appreciation of family values, education, and respect for hierarchical relationships in the family. For example, opinions of parents and the elderly always need to be respected. They also continue to practice ancestor worship and to worship local spirits (RUTLEDGE 1992; FREEMAN 1995). Importantly, one basic characteristic of Vietnamese traditional culture is the ability to adapt to change to remain in harmony with other cultures and ethnic groups in

the host country. Traditional cultural practices thus support change while reaffirming Vietnamese cultural and ethnic identity, which emerges as an adapted identity.

This adapted ethnic identity is based on a continuous process of contact with the dominant culture and can be “conceived as a process, affected by history as well as contemporary circumstances, and by local as well as global dynamics” (SANSONE 2003, 3). Vietnamese engage in traditional practices while adjusting to the American culture in order to become part of the host country. According to Rutledge, the Vietnamese “view macro-American society as neither a constituent nor an opponent, but rather as a necessary ingredient for survival. Understanding, employing, and appreciating American ways is a must from the Vietnamese perspectives; adopting them is another consideration altogether” (RUTLEDGE 1992, 61). This mode of adaptation contrasts with those of other ethnic groups. According to Fugita and O’Brien, Japanese Americans are among “the most homogeneous in the world” (FUGITA and O’BRIEN 1991, 36), whereas Chinese Americans are more apt to congregate in segregated communities. Rutledge asserts that Vietnamese American adaptation “contains elements of both the Japanese-American and Chinese-American acculturation processes” but, he argues, “the distinctiveness of the Vietnamese communities ... is found in their resistance to change, their degree of resilience and adaptability, and their retention of old world values. At the same time that Vietnamese are adjusting to the United States, they are working to maintain a strong element of cultural continuity from Southeast Asia” (RUTLEDGE 1992, 60).

The result of mixing cultures from the homeland and host countries does not totally represent Vietnamese culture anymore. As FREEMAN states, “The Vietnamese have not simply adjusted to America, but rather have made it their home. This is seen, not only in the occupations, schooling and training they choose, but in significantly altered family and gender relations, as well as transformed religious ways, which fit neither traditional nor American stereotypes” (1995, III). Vietnamese choose to preserve their cultural values, but at the same time they adapt in order to take part in American society while developing their identity as Vietnamese Americans. This includes adopting new values and behaviors in business and other aspects of life. For example, they become straightforward, frank, and open, which is necessary for integration in the host country.

The transformation process of immigrants is complex because individuals face various situations to which they respond and change in different ways. Generational differences play an important role. There are, for example, elderly living on welfare in houses provided for them, and they receive a living allowance. They experience little engagement with American society and tend to live in more traditional Vietnamese ways. Vietnamese Americans who went to the U.S. as children, sometimes called the one and one-half generation, play two roles in the ways they adapt to American society. They behave as Americans outside the home, but at home with parents and family they speak Vietnamese, eat Vietnamese food, and relate with their families in Vietnamese ways. They adapt to the environment in the U.S., but at the same time they want to be Vietnamese. They are in-between two different cultures.



Andrew LAM (2005, 16) describes the feeling of being an outsider in the host country as well as in the homelands. Lam expressed his feelings about life in the U.S. and his return visit to Vietnam. He wrote:

Sometimes I go to a Vietnamese restaurant in San Francisco's Tenderloin District. I sit and stare at two wooden clocks hanging on the wall. The left one is carved in the shape of a florid S: the map of Vietnam. The one on the right is hewn in the shape of a deformed tooth: the map of America. Tick, tock, tick, tock. They run at different times. Tick, tock, tick, tock. I was born a Vietnamese. Tick, tock, tick, tock. I am reborn an American. Tick, tock, tick, tock, I am of one soul. Tick, tock, tick, tock. Two hearts. (LAM 2005, 98)

Other Vietnamese integrate into the American lifestyle without giving much attention to preserving their roots. This is especially true for the second generation who were born in the U.S. According to a recent study, many second generation Asian Americans reject Asian culture and try to be more American (KOH 2012, 148). They “revise and refine their identities to articulate and negotiate issues of race, gender, and generation both within and outside of the classroom” (LEONG 2007, 5). Because the younger generation has grown up surrounded by American peers, they may become less interested in Vietnamese values and customs. Some say that Vietnam is the country of their parents and they know little about Vietnam. They feel American, as they are born in the U.S., and say it is their country (KOH 2012).

A number of these youngsters go so far as to reject Vietnamese culture and language completely. Some of them, however, now regret that they only speak English. During my time at Indiana University in the 1990s, I became acquainted with some Vietnamese American families who told me they used to be proud that their children spoke perfect English. They had not taught Vietnamese to their children because they worried this would affect their English pronunciation. They, and their children, later regretted this decision. This was particularly true after the 1986 economic reforms in Vietnam when many Vietnamese Americans started to return to their home country. The need to be more fluent in Vietnamese and to be familiar with Vietnam increased, but many had no such knowledge.

This is an important issue for the third generation, many of whom are American but remain exposed to traditional Vietnamese values. As Andrew Trần, a student from Indiana University, explained to me, “I speak English, make friends with Americans, but I am still an Asian person, with yellow skin, and I am influenced by Vietnamese culture in family relationships and my parent's behavior. For instance, my parents want me to live with them, not allowing me to move out. Even though I cannot speak Vietnamese they still ask me “*Con chào cô, chào bác đi*” (to say hello in Vietnamese when meeting people). Or when seeing my grand mom, aunt, uncle, I cannot speak to them in Vietnamese. In fact, I am in-between, I am neither an American nor Vietnamese.”<sup>6</sup>

Some Vietnamese Americans do not feel they belong to what they perceive as the community of Caucasian Americans. They feel this difference mostly at their

jobs or at school, but also with friends. These Vietnamese Americans say they feel different because of the color of their skin, and because they are the children of refugees and immigrants. They experience a kind of dual identity constructed through experiences with their Vietnamese families and community that contrasts with experiences they have with other Americans through their jobs and study. This can become problematic when they grow up, as nationality does not just refer to legal status, but also to identity and sense of belonging. A number of people expressed that they are never sure about their identity, and feel that they do not belong anywhere. For example, in a prizewinning essay, Minh Huynh wrote that he is neither an American nor a Vietnamese: “If one were to ask a Vietnamese in Vietnam if I were Vietnamese, he or she would undoubtedly say no. The name used to describe a person such as myself would be *Việt Kiều*, which means foreign Vietnamese. If one were to ask a Caucasian in the United States if I were American, the answer would still be no. No matter how one views me, I am a Vietnamese American with a unique blend of both cultures” (cited in FREEMAN 1995, 112).

Meanwhile some of the older generation are concerned that youngsters have become too “Americanized” or “Westernized” (ESPIRITU and TRẦN 2002). One remedy for cultural loss and issues of cultural identity is, in the view of many elders, to maintain and revive certain aspects of cultural traditions particularly in language, family and social relations, and religious rituals. As Aguilar-San Juan states, “Vietnamese Americans need to stay Vietnamese so that they have some connection to themselves, their histories, and their cultures. For older generation, most of whom are refugees, this means ‘keeping our roots’” (AGUILAR-SAN JUAN 2009, xxvii). According to Công Mai, change is an important aspect of maintaining a strong cultural identity. He says, “We have to keep our roots in order to grow and to thrive. In order to take up the new, we may have to get rid of certain old things, but we don’t get rid of our own selves. To move fast into the mainstream, we have to maintain our cultural identity. And in maintaining our cultural identity, we will be contributing to the right tapestry of cultures that is America” (cited from AGUILAR-SAN JUAN 2009, xxvii).

Members of the Association of the Hùng Kings are especially concerned with the future of traditional culture. They hope to preserve Vietnamese traditions by holding public rituals and educating the young (FJELSTAD and NGUYỄN 2011). They want to maintain and recreate traditional Vietnamese culture in the U.S. and, at the same time, adapt to American society. This blend, according to PHẠM, “is the natural response in order protect the Vietnamese ethnic lifestyle from the attack of the host country’s culture” (1988, 28).

#### TRADITIONAL CULTURE IN SILICON VALLEY: THE HÙNG KINGS TEMPLE

Vietnamese traditional culture in Silicon Valley has evolved over a long period of time and can be found in a number of places. Within the home, people speak Vietnamese to each other, eat Vietnamese meals, and participate in Vietnam-

ese family relations. Children and grandchildren greet their parents in Vietnamese, and address each other in hierarchical order, expressing traditional kinship roles. They tell family stories and share memories of family customs and life in Vietnam. Each family I visited and interviewed had an ancestral altar, and some even had special ancestral worshipping rooms. Most family members gather on the death anniversary of their grandparents or ancestors. For example, in the Pham family, the eldest son was in charge of organizing the anniversary, and they had a room dedicated to their ancestors. He organized the day during the summer when the children and grandchildren were on holiday and were able to come from their various residences around the world. Ms. Chinh, who is the youngest daughter of a different family, has a big house with a space for worshipping. She wants to give a room in her house to her family to use for ancestral ceremonies even though she knows that the traditional custom is for the first son or the first paternal grandson to be in charge. Still, she said, “I would like to give my house to my family line for them to gather, not only for the current time but forever.”<sup>7</sup> Another woman, Mrs. Bửu Đoàn, still keeps ancestor worship alive, even for people recently deceased. She was brought to the U.S. to be reunited with her husband and children in 1992. Some years ago her husband passed away, but she still burns incense for him daily. She said, “Some old ladies, after 49 days after the deaths of their husbands, they will stop with this ritual that takes place during the morning, but I still keep the morning practice. I go on with the ritual for one hundred days after his death, and I make daily offerings to him whenever I eat. Today, I still continue the ritual. Every morning I replace water in nine cups and alcohol in two cups. In the morning, I light the incense and in the afternoon, I pray for him. I do it every day.”<sup>8</sup>

The ability to practice traditional culture has expanded over time. During the first years of resettlement in the U.S. the Vietnamese were dispersed so they could not meet in larger groups and their priority was simply to resettle. It was only after they moved to larger cities that they were able to establish public arenas for traditional culture, which helped to further cement Vietnamese American identity (AGUILAR-SAN JUAN 2009; FREEMAN 1995; RUTLEDGE 1992). They started to make use of their greater economic opportunities to reaffirm their social, political, and cultural positions in society. They built a large number of their own local spaces such as Little Saigon where there are Vietnamese restaurants, with services and decorations and signboards in Vietnamese, as well as Vietnamese activities such as music, traditional New Year events, and rites of passage including birthday and wedding celebrations. There are also stores for the purchase of Vietnamese clothing, food and beverages, and ritual objects. They also began to develop worship centers such as Buddhist temples, Vietnamese Catholic churches, and temples for the Mother Goddess Religion and the Hùng Kings.

The first temple for the Mother Goddess religion was built inside a small residential apartment in 1978. Since then a number of temples have been constructed that are also situated in private homes or reconstructed garages, and today there are more than ten active temples in San Jose. The temple for the Hùng Kings started in a similar vein but, unlike worship of the Mother Goddesses, which was

practiced by small groups of mediums and their masters, the Hùng Kings ceremonies were always meant to be large, public affairs.

The Hùng Kings Association was founded in 1981 by Mr. Liêm, who migrated to the U.S. in 1975 at the age of seventeen, and a group of elders in San Jose. Honoring the Hùng Kings with a beautiful worshipping space had been a dream of Mr. Liêm's since childhood and he had a strong desire to pursue the dream in the U.S., but first he had to learn the language, finish his education, and find employment as an electrical engineer. As Ms. Hương, Liêm Thanh Nguyễn's wife explained, "First they had to take care of their hard life, the language was not their own language, and the country was not their country."<sup>9</sup> Once they were settled, Mr. Liêm and the elders were able to move forward with their plans for the temple.

They began by purchasing goods, which were stored in Mr. Liêm's garage, and organizing yearly ceremonies that were performed as parts of other, larger celebrations such as New Year parades (FJELSTAD and NGUYỄN Thanh Liêm 2011). By 1989 the association grew to more than one thousand members, and they applied for nonprofit status as a cultural organization with the state and federal governments. In 1993 they were finally able to build the temple in downtown San Jose and it was furnished with altar tables, statues, and decor that Mr. Liêm had purchased during several trips to Vietnam. Altars to the Mother Goddess religion were added to a separate section of the temple in 1995, so today rituals to the Hùng Kings and the Mother Goddess religion are held in the same temple, often on the same days. The Hùng Kings temple is the only public temple in Silicon Valley for the worship of traditional Vietnamese ancestors, gods, and goddesses.

The Hùng Kings temple was mainly established by the older generation who migrated from northern to southern Vietnam in 1954 and later to the U.S. According to Mr. Liêm, "The Northern people wherever they go, they aim to preserve their own culture. The Northerners are pioneers in the preservation, reestablishment of their traditional culture, the Southerners and the people from the central part of Vietnam are less passionate." From the beginning, according to Mr. Liêm, they were enthusiastic because they thought of the future of their children and grandchildren. They wanted to develop Vietnamese culture in the U.S. and bring the core spirit of the culture to younger Vietnamese Americans.<sup>10</sup> As Mr. Liêm said, "Even though we live far from the homeland, we still preserve the traditions and customs, not only for our generation, but also for the future generation" (FJELSTAD and NGUYỄN Thanh Liêm 2011, 7).

The main goals of members of the association are to honor their ancestors, safeguard their heritage, and educate their children and grandchildren. After building a permanent temple they organized annual rituals for the anniversary of the Hùng Kings and rituals commemorated to other national heroes such as the Sisters Trưng and Triệu and the spirit of Trần Hưng Đạo. Cultural change as well as preservation is evidenced in the rituals of the temple. Although the temple was established to practice what it is seen as a very Vietnamese tradition, the rituals have been modified. The statues in the temple, the arrangement of altars, the decoration, and the ceremonial performance are different when compared to the original Hùng

Kings temple complex in Việt Trì city, Phú Thọ province. However, the rituals preserve the core value of worship, which is reflected in the philosophical folk saying, “when drinking water, remember its source.” Such change and preservation do not contradict each other, but instead create adapted cultural practices that creatively and appropriately fit with life in the new environment.

These rituals quickly served as a catalyst for developing the community. When visiting the temple people gather together to burn incense while remembering the ancestor’s land and those who served and gained merits from protecting their home country. After the solemn ceremonies they visit and share a meal, which is often a lively time full of good cheer. The temple is also a place where children and grandchildren come to visit and learn about Vietnamese history and people and the customs their ancestors have passed down. The rituals also contributed to a desire among U.S. Vietnamese to introduce their culture to other ethnic groups. In California, at the beginning of the immigration in the 1970s, other Americans did not know about Vietnamese culture and customs. Later, as Ms. Hương explained, people from other ethnicities started to respect the Vietnamese and their culture when they learned that Vietnamese kept their own rich cultural expressions and close kinship relations.<sup>11</sup>

Although the Hùng Kings temple plays an important role in the maintenance of Vietnamese culture, there have been a number of challenges. Most importantly, the temple is facing a reduction in membership. When the Association of Hùng Kings was first established there were over one thousand members but today, with the older generation dying off, there are only about three hundred (see FJELSTAD and NGUYỄN Thanh Liêm 2011). During my 2015 observation of the Annual Anniversary of the Hùng Kings, about one hundred people took part in the ceremony but only twenty were under the age of forty. Mr. Liêm partly attributes the lack of youth to the influences of other larger religions such as Buddhism and Catholicism.

Buddhist temples and Vietnamese Catholic churches in Silicon Valley have numerous followers that have generously donated to the construction of worshipping spaces. Ancestor worship, although practiced daily by most U.S. Vietnamese, receives less attention and funding because it is less visible and is viewed as a private, not a public, activity. Consequently, people are more likely to fund a large Buddhist temple or Catholic Church, but may not see the need for a large temple for ancestor worship. Also, as members of the association said, “World religions are stronger than ancestor worship and the Hùng Kings worship.” Mr. Liêm worries that traditional ancestral worship will slowly diminish because most young people go to Buddhist temples or churches for spiritual help.

Some U.S. Vietnamese are reluctant to attend traditional ceremonies because they have been converted to larger religions and they worry about potential conflicts between different religious practices. When studying spirit possession in Silicon Valley, Karen Fjelstad and I found that Vietnamese Catholics often found it hard to practice rituals dedicated to their local spirits once they had been converted (FJELSTAD and NGUYỄN Thi Hien 2011). Later, when they were more comfortable, they returned to their local practices and began to simultaneously participate in

different elements of traditional culture. This is also found in ancestor worship. Some individuals worry that ancestor worship conflicts with other religious practices, but others have resolved their concerns. For example, during the Anniversary of the Hùng Kings in 2015 the ceremonial master was a Buddhist layman who voluntarily served at Buddhist temples. He agreed to be the ritual master to replace the previous man who had to resign due to leg pain. He spent a great deal of time learning the ritual and, when asked why, he responded, because of “cultural identity and transmission to the next generation!”<sup>12</sup>

Members of the Association of Hùng Kings meet on a regular basis, and they have developed a plan for increasing their presence and membership. They want to purchase a larger piece of land where they can build a more spacious venue for their cultural events. They hope to have it beautifully decorated with the art and artifacts Mr. Liêm has already imported from Vietnam, and gardens and pools to surround the temple. The new temple would be a center for Vietnamese Americans with traditional rituals and language classes, and a showplace for Vietnamese culture. Hopefully, a larger and more beautiful temple would attract more Vietnamese Americans as well as people of other ethnicities. In order to institute this dream of a larger temple, the association turned to the Vietnamese government.

Members of the association contacted the Vietnamese ambassador in San Francisco to request assistance from the Vietnamese government. The decision to do so was not taken lightly, as they were aware that some members of the Vietnamese American community might take serious offense at such an action. They nonetheless asserted that the need to support traditional culture in the community came first, and they had religious and cultural, but not political, motives. They hoped to avoid conflict by seeking assistance quietly.

The association’s request focused on a number of factors. First, they emphasized that Vietnamese practice worship of the Hùng Kings everywhere, not just in Vietnam. By helping to build a temple in San Jose, the Vietnamese government would support the tradition and help to spread knowledge about important cultural heroes. This argument was supported in 2012 when UNESCO designated Hùng Kings worship as intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO 2012). Members of the association also explained that the new temple would be a showplace for Vietnamese culture, much like the Japanese and Chinese friendship gardens, which are also situated in San Jose. Although the association was not motivated by reconciliation, the new temple would be an expression of friendship between Vietnam and all the people of San Jose.

I attended meetings with the association and the general consul, and the association was well received. The consul responded to their requests by saying, “Their desire to have a more spacious place to build a bigger temple under better conditions has the noble purpose of commemorating their roots, and transmitting the tradition to young people about the homeland. It is their desire and in accordance with the tradition of our ancestors.”<sup>13</sup> The general consul recognized the impor-

tance of the temple and its role in preserving traditional culture, but the association has yet to receive any practical assistance.

Although the future of the Hùng Kings temple remains uncertain, the dedication of the association has not wavered. Since the early 1980s the mostly elderly members of the association have been working diligently to find ways of practicing and preserving traditional culture. They have maintained a steady focus on the importance of traditions and the need to pass traditional culture on to the next generation. As Mr. Liêm explained, “Letting the people and our children know about the Hùng Kings and Vietnam’s cultural traditions is a way to honor our ancestors. It is also a way to teach our children about their origins and bring them up with a sense of pride in their heritage” (FJELSTAD and NGUYỄN Thanh Liêm 2011, 7).

### CONCLUSION

While U.S. Vietnamese are trying to adapt to American culture they are also finding ways to preserve their own cultural identity. This emphasis on cultural preservation is a deeply seated aspect of Vietnamese culture and society in general, as is evident in the long history of relations between Vietnam and other countries that have tried, but mostly failed, to dominate them. Such cultural preservation is possible because Vietnamese are flexible, adaptable, and creative. Vietnamese Americans, for example, often say there is something to learn from both cultures, and try to take the best from each.

Examining cultural identity as part of continuous transformation that changes and develops over time, this research note has explored generational differences in cultural identity and traditional culture. Whereas many members of the older generations have tried to keep Vietnamese traditions alive, the younger generations have greater exposure to peoples of other ethnicities and are less likely to engage in cultural preservation. This sometimes results in individuals having an unclear sense of identity and the feeling of being caught between two cultures. These younger generations are nonetheless exposed to traditional culture in their homes and in neighborhoods and business centers such as Little Saigon.

The U.S. Vietnamese elders have expressed concern about cultural preservation since they first migrated to the U.S. Nowadays, many of the first generation have passed away and the rest are wondering whether their children and grandchildren will preserve traditional culture. Many members of this older generation are actively engaged in maintaining traditions. The association of Hùng Kings has been trying to preserve Vietnamese culture, customs, and rituals since the early 1980s and they have always viewed the intergenerational transmission of traditional culture as one of their most important goals. Their strategies for attracting younger Vietnamese are to build a larger temple and draw the interest and participation of people of other ethnicities. And because they are so motivated, members of the association have even approached the Vietnamese government for assistance. As Mr. Liêm explained in his meeting with the general consul, “The customs dedicated to ancestors, kings, and heroes are Vietnamese religious practices

that have existed for a long time. These religious practices originated in Vietnam. It is our mission to introduce them to the Vietnamese and other ethnic groups in the U.S., to familiarize them with these important traditional cultural practices.”<sup>14</sup>

This research note has illustrated that change is an important feature of immigration and resettlement, but cultural preservation is also significant. By examining generational variations in adaptation and cultural identity, and actions of the Hùng Kings Association to preserve traditional culture, I have shown that while Vietnamese Americans are integrating into Silicon Valley life, they are doing so while changing as well as maintaining traditional culture.

---

#### NOTES

\* A part of this research was funded by the Vietnamese National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED) under grant number VIII.3-2012.04. I would like to express my sincere thanks to my informants, the Vietnamese Americans in San Jose and their relatives, friends, and families in Vietnam who provided their valuable information for this research.

1. Interview, Mr. Đông and Mr. Bằng, April, 2015. The names of informants in this research note have been changed to protect their privacy.

2. In this research note, I use the terms “Vietnamese Americans” or “overseas Vietnamese” to indicate the Vietnamese immigrants, refugees, or boat people who settled in the United States.

3. In the United States, there are about twenty cities with large populations of Vietnamese that have districts named Little Saigon (Tiểu Sài Gòn).

4. The official name and address is the Temple Dedicated to the National Ancestors of Hùng Kings, 780 South First Street, San Jose, California, United States. Due to the worship of the Hùng Kings performed primarily by Vietnamese, I used the name The Temple of Hùng Kings to avoid the imposing on all other ethnicities in Vietnam.

5. Interview with Ms. Anh in San Jose in 2008 and in 2015

6. Interview with Andrew Trần in Indiana, 1999.

7. Interview with Ms. Chinh, San Jose, April, 2015.

8. Interview with Ms. Bửu Đoàn in San Jose, April 2015.

9. Interview with Ms. Hương, Mr. Liêm’s wife, in Hanoi, 2013

10. Interview with Mr. Nguyễn Thanh Liêm and Ms. Hương in Hanoi, 2013.

11. Interview with Ms. Hương in Hanoi, 2013.

12. Interview with Mr. Bằng, San Jose, April 2015.

13. The speech by the Vietnamese General Consul took place in San Francisco in the meeting with the Association of Hùng Kings Temple in April, 2015. As a researcher on the Hùng Kings temple and as the representative from the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, I was able to take part in a meeting hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in June, 2015, with the participation of the representatives of different ministries in Vietnam on the case of Hùng Kings temple in San Jose. There were governmental guidelines (*chủ trương*) about the request of the Association of the Hùng Kings to expand and move the place of worship space to a new location. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is currently in the process of gathering opinions from other relevant ministries. At the meeting, most representatives raised their voices in support of expanding the worship space and building a new temple. However, a representative from the Ministry of Internal Affairs wondered whether the temple used to



worship figures from the old Sai Gon regime, even though they have been recently removed. Still, he expressed his reluctance due to the political ideology of the members of the association. According to him, it is hard to believe that they are not anti-communists.

14. Cited from the speech by Mr. Liêm Thanh Nguyễn at the meeting with the Vietnamese General Ambassador in San Francisco, April 2015.

---

REFERENCES

AGUILAR-SAN JUAN, Karin

2009 *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

ANH Phi

2015 Xóm rác San Jose (Thung lũng Hoa Vàng—California) [The trash corner in San Jose (Wild yellow flowers valley—California)]. <http://www.gocnhinalan.com/cac-hoat-dong-khac/bai-6-xom-rac-san-jose-thung-lung-hoa-vang-california.html>. Accessed 12 May 2015.

CAMINO, Linda, and Ruth KRULFELD, eds.

1994 *Reconstructing Lives, Recapturing Meaning: Refugee Identity, Gender, and Culture Change*. Basel, Switzerland: Gordon and Breach.

CORNELL, S., and D. HARTMANN

2007 *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Fore.

EBIHARA, May, Carol A. MORTLAND, and Judy LEDGERWOOD

1994 *Cambodian Culture since 1975: Homeland and Exile*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

ESPIRITU, Yên Lê, and Thơm TRẦN

2002 Viet Nam, nuoc toi (Vietnam, My Country): Vietnamese Americans and transnationalism. In *The Changing Face of Home: The Transnational Lives of the Second Generation*. Peggy Levitt and Mary Waters, eds., 367–98. New York: Russell, Sage Foundation.

FJELSTAD, Karen, and NGUYỄN Thanh Liêm

2011 Preserving heritage, teaching the children: Worshiping the Hùng Kings in Silicon Valley, California. In “Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Society, with a Case Study of the Worship of Hùng Kings in Vietnam” conference proceedings, 971–83. Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies. Publishing House of Culture and Information.

FJELSTAD, Karen, and NGUYỄN Thi Hien

2011 *Spirits without Borders: Vietnamese Spirit Mediums in a Transnational Age*. New York: Palgrave.

FREEMAN, James M.

1989 *Hearts of Sorrow: Vietnamese-American Lives*. Stanford California: Stanford University Press

1995 *Changing Identities: Vietnamese American 1975-1995*. Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon.

- FUGITA, Stephen S., and David, J. O'BRIEN  
 1991 *Japanese American Ethnicity: The Persistence of Community*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- HALL, Stuart  
 1990 Cultural identity and diaspora. In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford, 222–37. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- JAMIESON, Neil  
 2010 A world like water: Context and process in Vietnamese culture. In *Hiện đại và động thái của truyền thống ở Việt Nam: Những cách tiếp cận nhân học* [Modernities and dynamics of tradition in Vietnam: Anthropological approaches]. Lương, Hy Văn; Ngô, Văn Lê, Nguyễn, Văn Tiệp; Phan, Thị Yên Tuyết, eds., 463–84. Ho Chi Minh City: Publishing House of National University.
- KOH, Priscilla Siew Im  
 2012 Vietnam's Familiar Strangers: Narratives of Home, Homeland and Belonging among Second Generation Việt Kiều in Sài Gòn. Doctoral Dissertation at Vrije Universiteit.
- LAM, Andrew  
 2005 *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora*. Berkeley: Heyday.
- LEONG, Russell C.  
 2007 Introduction. In *Balancing Two Worlds: Asian American College Students Tell Their Life Stories*. Garrod, A. and Kilkenny, R., eds., 1–13. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- LEVITT, Peggy  
 2007 *God Needs no Passport: Immigrants and the Changing American Religious Landscape*. New York: The New Press.
- MẠNH Kim  
 2015 Những Việt kiều lẫy lừng đất Mỹ (The Famous Vietnamese Americans in the United States). <http://phapluattp.vn/ho-so-phong-su/nhung-viet-kiieu-lay-lung-dat-my-565334.html>. Accessed 17 June 2015.
- MATTHEWS, Ellen  
 1982 *Culture Clash*. Yarmouth, Me.: Intercultural Press, Incorporated.
- NGUYỄN, Danny  
 2010 Tình người trên đất Mỹ [Human Affection in the United States]. <https://kieubaohaingoi.com>. Accessed 10 May, 2015.
- PHẠM Kim Vinh  
 1988 *Cuộc tự vệ văn hóa Việt tại San Jose* [Cultural self-defense in San Jose]. California: Book Case P.K.V.
- PHAN Ngọc  
 1999 *Bản sắc văn hóa Việt Nam* [Vietnamese identity]. Publishing House of Literature.
- PORTES, A., and R. G. RUMBAUT  
 2001 *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press

- RAMBO, A. Terry  
2005 *Searching for Vietnam: Selected Writings on Vietnamese Culture and Society*. Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, Kyoto Area Studies on Asia.
- RUTLEDGE, Paul  
1992 *The Vietnamese Experience in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- SANSONE, Livio  
2003 *Blackness without Ethnicity: Constructing Race in Brazil*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- TAN, Chee-Beng  
2013 *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Diaspora*. London: Routledge.
- UNESCO  
2012 Decision 7.Com 11.36. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/decisions/7.COM/11.36>. Accessed 15 December 2013.