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Assimilation or Isolation?: Minority Life in Post–War Viet Nam

In July 1954, the Geneva Accords were signed, marking the end of the First Indochina War and the official separation of Viet Nam into two halves, divided at the 17th Parallel. With this division, Cambodia, Viet Nam's southern neighbor, was placed in a precarious predicament. If the prescribed democratically–held election meant to re–unify the country was not held, Cambodia reasoned, the two Viet Nams would almost certainly go to war. And given its strategic location, if fought, this war would almost inevitably extend to Cambodia. This reasoning proved to be correct, and from 1970 to the war's official end in 1975, both North and South Vietnamese troops used Cambodia for a variety of military purposes, including building permanent bases throughout the country. In 1975, in accordance with the Paris Peace Accords signed in 1973, both U.S.–backed ARVN troops and DRVN troops evacuated Cambodia, creating a power vacuum quickly filled by the Khmer Rouge. On April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge evacuated Phnom Peng, Cambodia's capital, and the remnants of the old power structure, officially marking the start of their four–year reign. Individuals, such as Lisa Chhin, were forced to flee the only home they had known, escaping to surrounding countries such as Viet Nam and Thailand. There, these individuals were forced to contend with racist prejudices based on their minority statuses, and poor living conditions as a result. Ultimately, while Lisa's narrative supports the conventional view of minorities as impoverished individuals, her increased allegiance to Viet Nam during her eight years there suggest that she desperately tried to adopt the Vietnamese lifestyle despite these racist prejudices.

Lisa Chhin was born in 1962 to a Vietnamese–Chinese father and a Cambodian mother. The oldest of five siblings, each born two years apart from the previous child, Lisa felt an instant maternal bond, and noted the need to protect her younger siblings throughout her life. Growing up in Cambodia, she felt extremely close to her family, helping her mother go to the doctor and supermarket, and her father with his shoe–making business, the primary source of income for the Chhins. This ease of life ended abruptly on April 17, 1975, when the Khmer Rouge overtook her hometown of Phnom Peng, the capital of Cambodia, and forced all residents to evacuate the city immediately. With little time to spare, Lisa and her family gathered as much gold and clothing as they could carry, and began an escape journey lasting several months that eventually located the family in Tay Ninh Province in Southern Viet Nam. In 1980, the Vietnamese government announced that the Cambodian immigrants who had escaped the Khmer Rouge were temporary residents, and began sending all able men, including Lisa's father and brother, to refugee camps. After a few years of separation from the rest of her family (Lisa's mother being in Cambodia and her sister being in another city in Viet Nam), Lisa reunited with her parents and siblings and returned to Cambodia in 1983, eight years after initially moving to Viet Nam (Chhin).

To fully understand Lisa's story, particularly her life in Viet Nam as a Cambodian minority, it is first important to understand theories of minority life, particularly why minorities were traditionally seen as impoverished individuals with lower qualities of life than majority communities. In Nguyen Thu Huong's study of ethnic minorities in Viet Nam today, she suggests that this view has been predicated on three primary factors that have been true of minority life since after the Viet Nam War. First, she notes that minorities have been seen as impoverished individuals because of their general lack of resources, including financial resources, "[a] lack of education, … of cultural familiarity with the dominant Kinh culture, … and of modern outlook and awareness" (Nguyen 174). Second, she argues that this view of

ethnic minorities as impoverished is the result of prejudices and stereotypes by the majority Kinh culture. Third, Nguyen states that the Vietnamese majority holds this view of ethnic minorities because they fundamentally lack knowledge of the minorities' culture; in other words, that this false view is due to cultural ignorance. This third factor supports Philip Taylor's argument that in the past, "ethnic minorities were traditionally self–regulating societies. Their cultural distinctiveness [was] a function of their historical, geographical, and social remove from the ethnic majority, from the markets and cities of the plains, and from global linkages" (Taylor 4). In other words, this cultural ignorance was due to ethnic minorities actively self–excluding themselves from society, in large part to preserve their individual cultures from being lost to the dominant culture. While Lisa Chhin did lack resources, and may have been the victim of prejudices, especially as a result of the war between Cambodia and Viet Nam during part of her eight years in Viet Nam, she actively tried to be a part of the majority Vietnamese culture, the opposite of Nguyen and Taylor's arguments.

Throughout Lisa's eight years in Viet Nam, she and her family suffered from severe poverty, primary due to a lack of financial resources and a lack of opportunities for advancement, including a possibility to obtain education. Although Lisa's family did bring gold to Viet Nam, this meant little to a local economy struggling to rebuild itself post–Viet Nam War. As such, shortly after moving to Tay Ninh, Lisa's parents were forced to resume their shoe–making business, for which her father made the shoes' soles and her mother sewed the shoes' tops. Because these shoes were hand–made, Lisa's parents could not make more than a few pairs a day, which they then sold to various shop owners in Saigon. The little money they raised through this business was immediately put towards food and other basic necessities. In charge of going grocery shopping, Lisa noted various ways she found ingredients for cheap prices, including waiting to buy from the later market, where the prices were lower, and relying on

government–subsidized foodstuffs, including cereal, rice, and potatoes (Chhin). Lisa's economic reality during this time aligns with Nguyen's argument that ethnic minorities in Viet Nam have been seen as impoverished because they actually lack basic necessities/financial resources. Another example of this poverty is the Chhin house. Lisa noted that her house was not subdivided into specific rooms, but was rather one large space artificially divided. Her family lacked basic furniture and appliances, including beds, a dining table, and a functional toilet. Lisa made the daily meals using wood to make an outside fire (Chhin). Nguyen's argument regarding the majority view of minorities also stems from a lack of access to various institutions that could help with socioeconomic advancement, including education and the political structure/political leaders. Because Lisa's parents spent their days working for their shoe–making business, Lisa, as the oldest child, was forced to take care of the household chores. This left no time in her day for an education, something, she notes, that was obtained by her younger brother and sister. Her parents also did not have the time to further their economic prospects by obtaining an education, or through establishing relationships with individuals in positions of power or with access to the Vietnamese market. In other words, Lisa's family had no choice but to remain in their impoverished state, thus perpetuating the dominant majority view of minorities as "subjugated, … overrun, [and] overwhelmed" (Taylor 5).

The ongoing suspicions and negative relations between Cambodia and Viet Nam during Lisa's eight years in Viet Nam most likely led to negative prejudices and stereotypes against Lisa's family and other Cambodians in southern Viet Nam, known aa Khmer Krom, thus proving Nguyen's second cause of seeing minorities as impoverished and irrelevant. As previously mentioned, the Viet Nam War extended into Cambodia during its later years, thus pitting the Khmer Rouge with the North Vietnamese troops. While initially, the two troops united against their anti–Communist enemies, tensions began to rise between the two groups as the DRVN

continued to exploit the Cambodian countryside. And when King Sihanouk was overthrown in a coup d'état in 1970, and was replaced by Lon Nol, a new era of Cambodian–North Vietnamese relations began. According to Joseph R. Pouvatchy, "[i]n reawakening the ancient Khmer resentments against the Vietnamese, Lon Nol was hoping to give rise to a new feeling of nationalism among the people, no longer under the stamp of the charismatic personality of Sihanouk but under an anti–Vietnamese banner" (Pouvatchy 445). To this end, thousands of Vietnamese living in Cambodia at the time, including many South Vietnamese civilians outside of this conflict, were arrested and deported, or killed. The North Vietnamese responded by secretly killing Cambodian troops sent from North Viet Nam, and by forcing the Cambodian state to embrace a harsh system of reform, including collectivization (Chandler 208). Given these circumstances, it was no wonder Lisa immigrated to Viet Nam deeply distrustful of a Cambodia that had recently been taken over by the very Khmer Rouge who had held anti–Vietnamese sentiments for years.

To understand the effects of these anti–Khmer and anti–Vietnamese sentiments on minority individuals, such as Lisa, it is important to understand the vital role the state plays in shaping these individuals lives. According to Nguyen Thu Huong, "[f]or its part, the Vietnamese state has played a major role in structuring the avenues for social mobility and inclusion, cultural expression and political participation in the highlands" (Nguyen 175). In other words, the Vietnamese state creates the policies and social structures needed to either assimilate or separate the majority and minority populations. Without the state apparatus, minorities would have to interact with majority individuals through informal channels, many of which perpetuate the unequal power dynamic between the two groups. Yet when the formal system of power has a bias against a particular country or minority group of individuals, social isolation and exclusion are almost certain.

The anti–Cambodian and anti–Khmer sentiments that existed in Viet Nam in 1975 when Lisa and her family immigrated to Viet Nam only intensified in the next four years, when the Cambodian–Vietnamese War took place. When the Khmer Rouge overtook Phnom Peng on April 17, 1975, they ushered in a new era of Cambodian governance, creating a new state known as Democratic Kampuchea (DK). The DK's primary goal was to seek revenge for what they saw as a complete encroachment of Cambodia's sovereignty during the Viet Nam War by both North and South Vietnamese (Hashmi 10). To this end, in early 1977, DK armed forces began attacking border provinces in Viet Nam and began killing any Cambodians with pro–Vietnamese sentiments. Ben Kiernan notes, "[b]y the next year [1978] the DK regime was massacring hundreds of thousands of ethnic Cambodians for allegedly possessing 'Vietnamese heads on Khmer bodies'" (Kiernan 457). These massacres eventually led to a full–fledged genocide, in which 2 million Cambodians, or about 21% of the total population, were brutally and senselessly murdered. In 1979, the border skirmishes, the genocide, and Khmer Rouge rule in general all ended when Vietnamese troops victoriously took back the city of Phnom Peng. Given the reestablishment of a stable, safe Cambodia, in 1980, the Vietnamese government called those who had fled the Khmer Rouge in 1975, including Lisa and her family, "temporary," and called for their return to Cambodia.

Despite these ongoing political tensions between her home country and her new country, besides her father and brother's experience in the refugee camp in 1980, Lisa and her family were not adversely affected by these tensions or the resulting racial prejudices and stereotypes. Lisa noted that besides her aunt who had already been living in Viet Nam, there were no other Cambodians in her immediate neighborhood in Tay Ninh, apart from her family. Yet she did not experience any racist sentiments, noting a few particularly kind neighbors who would give her food when they saw her family's shoe business struggling, and one neighbor who would allow

her and her siblings to watch the opera on his television every night (Chhin). Perhaps this experience was due to the fact that Lisa's daily life did not put her in any precarious positions where racial tensions might be more common. She mainly kept to herself, tending to the household chores and taking care of her siblings and helping with the family business when she had time. She was also a female teenager at the time. This fact, plus her family's general lack of basic resources, perhaps caused her Vietnamese neighbors to take pity on the Chhins, causing them to help, rather than verbally or physically harm, their new Cambodian neighbors. This was not the case with the Vietnamese government, however. As previously mentioned, in 1980, after the end of the Cambodian–Vietnamese War, this government called all Cambodian refugees temporary, and called for their return to Cambodia. To this end, they began to place all males in refugee camps, including Lisa's father and brother. These two individuals, along with the rest of Lisa's family, had no ties whatsoever to the Khmer Rouge, and were most likely opposed to them, given the Khmer Rouge's central role in their forced removal from Phnom Peng. Yet, the Chhins were unfairly associated with them, resulting in their unwanted status, despite having done no harm or wrong to any Vietnamese during their five years there thus far. The only way to rationalize this decision, then, is through unfair, racist prejudices and stereotypes.

The third, and final, explanation Nguyen gives for why the majority population in Viet Nam saw ethnic minorities as impoverished, isolated individuals was that these minorities actively self–exclude themselves from majority culture, and thus, this perception of minorities was due to cultural ignorance. Nguyen bases her argument on an idea proposed by James Scott. Scott states, "the social structure, livelihood strategies and identifications adopted by highlands actors in the vast region he refers to as 'Zomia' were shaped historically around the desire to avoid being totally and irrevocably absorbed within the lowland state's project" (Nguyen 176). In other words, because the cultures of the ethnic minority groups were distinctly different from

that of the majority group, these minorities actively choose to self–exclude as a form of cultural preservation. Applying this theory to Lisa's narrative begs the question: what was the culture of Cambodians at the time? During this time, the vast majority of Cambodians were ethnic Khmers (non–affiliated with the Khmer Rouge). According to Abdulgaffar Peang–Meth, Khmer culture and society have been significantly shaped by both Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism, particularly their emphasis on rejecting intransigence; loyalty to leaders; passivity and conservatism; and honor, faith, and dignity (Peang–Meth 447–449). In his article, Peter A. Poole takes a slightly different view of Khmer culture, noting that "to most Cambodians I have known, the image of peace and the good life includes substantial freedom, a choice of basic life–style as between farming and bureaucratic service; [and] the right to change from one boss (headman, employer, patron) to another if the first was inconsiderate" (Poole 337). While Lisa is a Buddhist, her cultural values as a Cambodian minority in Viet Nam more closely aligned with Poole's definition, particularly his emphasis on substantial freedom.

Throughout their eight years in Viet Nam, Lisa and her family actively tried to participate in the majority Vietnamese culture while still maintaining aspects of their original Cambodian heritage, thus partially disproving Nguyen's argument. For instance, Lisa noted that the majority of the dishes she prepared for her family during their time in Tay Ninh were Vietnamese dishes, especially those that included green beans, okra, sweet potatoes, and rice, while the majority of the dishes she prepared upon their return to Phnom Peng were primarily Cambodian meals (Chhin). Perhaps this was due to which ingredients were available/cheapest in the market, but Lisa stated that she really enjoyed the Vietnamese dishes she learned how to make. Additionally, rather than isolating herself through lack of language ability, Lisa pushed herself to learn Vietnamese quickly, primarily learning through observing individuals' mouths when they pronounced various words, and studying how different syllables sounded when combined to

form words. Her efforts paid off, and within two years of living in Viet Nam, she was fluent. This language ability then allowed her access to other aspects of Vietnamese culture, including the opera that she watched nightly at her neighbor's house. However, because Lisa was responsible for the household, taking care of her siblings, and helping out with her parents' shoe–making business, she did not have much leisure time. As a result, she could not fully immerse herself in the Vietnamese culture, but instead maintained aspects of the Cambodian culture she had grown up with. In accordance with Poole's argument, Lisa most valued freedom of choice. When reflecting on her eight years in Viet Nam, Lisa discussed the numerous adverse effects of her family's poverty on her life, noting that because of this poverty, various aspects of her daily routine, from the food she could buy to the leisure activities she had time for, were pre–determined (Chhin). She contrasted this time period with her life now in the United States, where she has the freedom to go to any grocery store in Upper Darby and buy any amount of food she would like, noting the numerous brands she could choose from for a foodstuff as simple as rice. Thus, while Lisa and her family actively tried to participate in the majority Vietnamese culture while living in Tay Ninh, their lack of resources forced them to maintain certain aspects of their old Cambodian culture.

In conclusion, Lisa's eight years as a Cambodian minority in Vietnam from 1975–1983 both supports and negates various aspects of the traditional view of minorities during this time. While she and her family lacked various resources, most notably financial resources and a lack of access to different institutions that could help them advance socioeconomically (e.g. schools, political leaders), they tried to assimilate to the traditional Vietnamese lifestyle as best as they could, given their financial restraint. While Lisa did not encounter racist prejudices or obvert exclusion from the civilians she interacted with or from the Vietnamese community she lived in in Tay Ninh, she did note the racist sentiments behind the Vietnamese government's 1980

decision to force male Cambodian refugees to enter into refugee camps, and to encourage Cambodians to return to their "permanent" home country. While Lisa was hurt by this policy, her allegiance to her new home country never waned. During the conclusion of the interview, Lisa noted that she felt a far stronger tie to Viet Nam than to Cambodia, despite it being one of the hardest periods of her life. This sentiment shows that even as an ethnic minority, and all of its associated challenges, one can fully assimilate to being an active participant in the majority community.

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12–12–18

Lessons from Lisa

What stroke me the most about my interview with Lisa was not just the importance of telling her story despite her civilian status, but more importantly, how excited she was to make her story public. It is easy to overlook individuals like Lisa in the broader narrative of the Viet Nam War, instead focusing on those directly involved in the military conflicts or the political decisions behind them. For many, lives like Lisa's are too quotidian, and the stories they have to tell are simply not worth hearing. Listening to Lisa's narrative, particularly about her daily life in Viet Nam post–escape, however, showed me the trials and tribulations present in even "everyday" chores. The difficulties Lisa faced in tasks as simple as buying food and cooking a meal for her family taught me that there are stories in every aspect of life, no matter how basic they may seem. This is why even the poorest, most remote civilians affected by the Viet Nam War should be heard from; doing so will create a far richer narrative of a war that historians are still trying to sort through. And perhaps more importantly, doing so will show these "insignificant" civilians that they matter too, and that their stories are valuable to others. At the end of the interview, Lisa mentioned how she had been wanting to make the narrative she had been telling us into a book, but that she felt that she lacked the English ability to do so. She noted how this Oral History Project was an easy, accessible way to make this story known to the public, and even to her step–daughter, whom she has yet to tell her full life story to. And Lisa is just one example of a wide population of individuals who have yet to tell these rich narratives. Imagine the history of the Viet Nam War that could be generated if we sought these out!

Another lesson I was reminded of by talking to Lisa was the sheer privilege and abundance of opportunities that comes with being an American citizen. It is easy to forget this privilege when surrounded by others are also afforded these same opportunities daily. Talking to Lisa reminded me to consider my life within a global perspective. The hardships I have experienced throughout my life do not even compare to the ones that Lisa has had to overcome, from the death of her siblings and grandmother during the escape from Cambodia, to the poverty she experienced in Vietnam post–war. The positivity and happiness Lisa radiates despite these immense challenges, simply because she now is living in the United States, has really stuck with me, and has inspired me to not take things for granted, even something as simple as multiple brands of rice in supermarkets.

A particular challenge I faced when interviewing Lisa was generating questions that could fully explore her narrative. It is easy to ask about tactics in battle or thoughts about the politics of the Viet Nam War, simply because most individuals do not know their specific details. When the interview centers on more quotidian topics, such as household chores as in Lisa's case, it can be hard to generate questions because at times, they seem so obvious one does not even think about them. Additionally, it can be hard to think deeply and critically about topics that occur in one's daily life, such as relations with family, and leisure time. Part of the difficulty I faced was that I did not know the specifics of Lisa's daily life ahead of time, so I had to generate follow–up questions on the spot based on the particular household chores Lisa was responsible for. Had I contacted Lisa before asking more details about these chores, it would have been easier for me to have well–thought out, analytical questions to ask during the interview.