

LISA CHHIN: IDENTITY AND ITS COMPLEXITIES

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Viet Nam Wars Fall 2018
12 December 2018

The Viet Nam War's legacy situates itself uniquely in light of the country's complicated historical and political origins. After contending with the centuries of foreign presence-- Chinese rule, French colonization, Japanese occupation, and American imperialism-- Viet Nam stands today a country that shines forth in the mind of many individuals as tragic, yet, resilient and hopeful. In lieu of the centuries of chaos and destruction, what is the anchor that guides the Vietnamese people to survive during such times? Lisa Chhin, a Chinese-Vietnamese-Cambodian set out for Viet Nam post war to escape the Khmer Rouge, and embodies the resilience that attributed many of the civilians in Southeast Asia. During our interview, there was a short moment when she was unsure of what identity she should classify as. She declared, "I just say I'm Cambodian." My task in this paper is to examine the meaning of identity and how it can be defined. Furthermore, I hope to offer an understanding of identity beyond ethnic and national origins. By illuminating the complexities of civilian identity, I hope to add to a more complicated understanding of the Viet Nam War and Vietnamese people as a whole.

In Viet Nam, after 1975, the war took about two million civilian lives. In Cambodia, after 1979, the Khmer Rouge took about two million civilian lives.¹ In Laos, during the Viet Nam War, the Secret War in Laos took seventy thousand civilian lives with the death rate steadily rising to one hundred deaths per year since 1973 in consequence from undetonated cluster bombs exploding decades later.² These statistics are significant to point out for two reasons: the true

¹ Patrick Hueveline a professor of Sociology at the University of California conducted research that reconfigures the conventional knowledge that the death rate is around 2 million. By accounting "10,000 combinations of 47 variables, reveals that there is a 95 percent chance that the death rate could have been between 1.2-2.8 million.

Meg Sullivan April 16, 2015. *UCLA demographer produces best estimate yet of Cambodia's death toll under Pol Pot* California: UCLA News Room, 2015

<<http://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/ucla-demographer-produces-best-estimate-yet-of-cambodias-death-toll-under-pol-pot>>

² Legacies of War. 2018. *Cluster Bomb Fact Sheet*. Accessed 12 2018.
<http://legaciesofwar.org/resources/cluster-bomb-fact-sheet/>

number of deaths within these countries in Southeast Asia are not definitive accurate, because x. However, on a more optimistic note, each individual survivor beyond this time is a testimony to the resilience of Vietnamese people and other individuals in Southeast Asia who have struggled for independence and sovereignty in a war torn nation. In the face of statistical numbers, the value of human life can be obscured by the scale of numbers. Furthermore, when thinking about war, it's easy to think about it in a mechanical and logistical manner. However, one must not forget the millions of civilians that have to contend with it. Thus, it is significant to talk about the routines of daily life, family life, and the innermost emotions about the war, because if there is anything about life to learn about war in Viet Nam it is through civilian resistance and resilience.

Lisa Chhin is Chinese-Vietnamese-Cambodian, born in Cambodia and the oldest of five siblings. Her mother is Cambodian and her father is Chinese-Vietnamese. In Cambodia, they lived a quaint life and sold shoes for a living. At thirteen years old, it was her duty to help with domestic chores: cooking, grocery shopping, and sometimes sewing together her father's handmade shoes. At the time, Lisa was young so she didn't understand the intricacies of the Cambodian Civil War, but she recalled the fateful day in April 17th 1975, when the communist Khmer Rouge Regime led by Pol Pot gained power in Cambodia [3:22]. When she looked around the city in Phnom Penh, she saw people wearing white which was a sign of surrender. Thus, there was a joyous air in the city, because the war in Cambodia was over, and peace could be restored. However, at four o'clock the possibility for peace remained only as a possibility; it was not imminent anytime soon. Under the new ruling regime, everyone in the city was forced to evacuate to the countryside or else they would be murdered. In turn, Lisa and her family set out to embark on a dangerous and arduous journey with the only destination as being as far away

from the danger in Cambodia as possible. Lisa stated, “you don’t know where you’re going. You don’t have a destination. You’re just walking” [17:00].

Lisa’s hope for peace as a thirteen year old was true the historical memory; it was not merely the misconception of a young and naive girl, but a celebration shared by the entire country. Many Cambodian people embraced the communist soldiers’ victory and believed that the new communist government would be an end to their suffering. However, as the Khmer Rouge made its way into Phnom Penh, many of the civilians quickly learned the true trajectory of the new regime. Through force and violence, many people fled from the cities to labor in fields to in turn eradicating all classes, distinction, and individuality. This new agrarian society that Pol Pot envisioned was radically Marxist, thought of a “utopian classless society” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2018).

It is interesting to think about the Khmer Rouge Regime in a historical context, especially in relation to Viet Nam. Although Viet Nam carried a significant role in collapsing Pol Pot’s regime in 1979 which puts these two forces as adversaries, there is a similarity between the reasons for fighting in the first place. For instance, despite the fact that the Viet Nam war is conceived as a war against communism, in a historically Vietnamese context, it is war to eradicate the country from foreign occupation. In Cambodia, Lon Nol, the commander in chief under Prince Norodom Sihanouk of the Khmer National Armed Forces, wanted to eradicate the country from the communist Vietnamese presence (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 2018). However, like the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), it was backed by American support and aid.³ Thus, in the eyes of the communists from both Viet Nam and Cambodia, this

³ In a New York Times article from 1973, The Nixon Administration vowed to support Lon Nol in his fight against Communist Khmer Rouge Aggression. This resulted in the US bombing parts in Cambodia that were heavily concentrated with communist Khmer Rouge, although the United States never declared war

proved to be another reiteration of foreign presence and American Imperialism. This nationalist rhetoric, pervaded beyond the Vietnamese border. It is a mistake, however, to conceive that this pervasiveness of this rhetoric speaks to the “domino theory” where Communism will take over Southeast Asia. More importantly, it is the rhetoric of unification that’ll eradicate Southeast Asia from American Imperialism. However, mentioning this must not dwindle the atrocities committed by the Pol Pot regime.

Lisa’s escape from Cambodia began on the day of April 17th 1975; the Chhin family finally arrived in Tay Ninh in September, to which they later resided in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). Lisa’s family was one of the millions of people in Cambodia who were forced to flee from the cities. She recalled, “the people at the time were very selfish” [24:00]. Everyone fended for their own survival, and there was nothing one could do but to continue walking and running ranging from at least 30 kilometers per day. During her escape, each day and night was a fight to survive against starvation, unrelenting mosquitoes, disease that took her sister’s eye-- death. Seeing and smelling dead bodies scattered on the ground became customary. Several weeks into their journey, Lisa’s brother and second oldest sister died from starvation and they had no choice but to leave their bodies where they fell. In turn, Lisa held tight onto her youngest sister until her family was able to find any semblance of safety which was waiting in Viet Nam.

For another week, the family moved through the deep jungles of Cambodia eventually found themselves in a small village to which they stayed in for about one month [19:30]. However, life in this village did not make life any easier, even though there were people around. Food was scarce and trust was uncertain. The first day in the village, Lisa saw her mother and

in Cambodia. Sydney H. Schanberg, "Lon Nol Says U.S. Vows Full Support." New York: *New York Times* pg. 1.

grandmother cry; however, these were not tears of joy. “When I saw them cry, I knew we were going to die there together... I thought-- I thought to myself, but I didn’t speak out. I didn’t speak out to my mother” [21:09].

There was no food to eat, and everyone in Lisa’s family was close to starvation. Even though they were miles from home and normalcy of daily routines felt distant, as the oldest sibling, Lisa found it her duty to take of the family. She set into the jungle to scavenge for food. Through necessity and the labor of love, Lisa was able to scavenge and prepare banana tree stump, yellow ants, and lizards. It is interesting to compare what village life looks amongst communist vietnamese villages versus Cambodia villages. In the former, the community was united by hopeful messages of resistance and liberation. In the latter, there was no sense of community or solidarity. Since life was so uncertain within the Khmer Rouge regime, no one could think about anything besides their own survival.

Within a month in the village, Lisa’s grandmother died from starvation [32:00]. Throughout the interview, Lisa mentioned that there was no time or leisure to think about her emotions. When her brother and sister died during the first several weeks of their journey, there was nothing she could do besides walk onwards. However, her grandmother’s death marked the first instance of emotion. When asked to describe how she felt, she straightforwardly says, “I felt like I just lost my grandmother”-- expressing grief but nothing more or less. Such a straightforward response is remarkably profound; although the tone and statement was said so matter of factly, there was much weight under these words.

In the context of the memoirs, this dejection and absurdity is felt by many of the civilian individuals, namely in Le Ly Hayslip’s *The Day Heaven and Earth Changed Places*. Throughout

the narrative, Hayslip's moments of purpose and resilience are stuck by bouts of meaninglessness. She couldn't make sense of what was going on; all she desired was to have Viet Nam liberated from the centuries of foreign invasion. Although these emotional moments may merely be regarded as a common sentiment of war, they are significant to raise; it highlights the complexities within each of these individuals. For instance, in *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*, Đặng Thùy Trâm inscribes upon many of the pages, the deaths and murders of her fellow countrymen. She remembers them not just as war heroes and comrades, but sons, brothers, friends, and classmates. When thinking about the violence that pervaded Viet Nam and much of Southeast Asia, the rhetoric of war becomes trivial and superfluous in the face of the innocent human lives that have no choice but to contend against these atrocities.

Immediately after her grandmother's death, Lisa's her father ordered them to leave, because remaining in the village was "waiting to die." Either they die at the hands of the Khmer Rouge or they die through starvation in the village. Due to her father's determination and perhaps out of luck, they found two Vietnamese families who warmly welcomed them on their journey to Viet Nam. The Chhin family was finally able to seek a sense of community in such uncertain times. Something particularly Vietnamese happens in the scope of Lisa Chhin's escape to Viet Nam. In other words, the type of interaction that Lisa's family had with this Vietnamese family speaks to a particularly Vietnamese rhetoric and practice that is revolutionary. Furthermore, in light of a historical context, Ho Chi Minh's nationalist sentiments following French colonization, it was every Vietnamese citizen's duty to help others in order to liberate the country. For instance, Hayslip and Đặng, a civilian and a nurse, put their lives on the line more than once to create a greater possibility for the person next to them to have a better chance at

survival. When thinking about Lisa's story, it is interesting to think about the contrast between Cambodian civilians and Vietnamese civilians in the face of danger. On one hand, when the Cambodian people were fleeing from the cities, they were often fending for themselves and often selfish. On the other hand, the Vietnamese family quickly embraced Lisa's family and guided them to Viet Nam.

Finally in September, after their seven to eight week journey from the village, Lisa's family arrived in Tay Ninh, Viet Nam. Her father's Vietnamese identity and Vietnamese uncle allowed for her family to become better accustomed to the new landscape even after the Viet Nam War. It is important to remember that in 1975, millions of Vietnamese people left Viet Nam for the United States, Europe, or neighboring countries. This raises the issue of how stable one's life can be if people from the very country she seeking refuge in, is also in search for peace elsewhere. Although the forces in life continued to assert trials against her human will and physical survival, being in Viet Nam from 1975-1983 marked the trajectory that led to stability and peace that she finally sought when she arrived in America in 1996.

In Viet Nam, she continued the tasks of her daily life; however, with the absences and struggles that the Khmer Rouge had inflicted upon her life. She took care of the family with five dollars per day. She cooked for them with the small rations of rice, sewed shoes with her mother for her father to assemble, and even spent some time seeking any kind of entertainment. One of the light hearted moments in the interview worth mentioning was when the day's work was completed, Lisa and her siblings would watch opera through the window of her neighbor's home. She would hold her sister, as she did during the escape, and her brother would bring a chair right next to her. In reference to Westmoreland's words, closing the film documentary, *Hearts and*

Minds, “The Oriental doesn’t put the same high price on life as does the Westerner... Life is cheap in the Orient.” While moment illuminates Lisa and her sibling’s human desire for entertainment, leisure, and fun, as any other child in the world might desire, it destroys the Western notion that Vietnamese were different from any Westerners. They, too, desired entertainment, comfort, and security. They, too, mourn death and celebrate life. For Westmoreland to say such a statement is ahistorical to the Vietnamese cultural practice of ancestral worship. In other words, honoring the dead places much value not only on the dead themselves, but on the quality of life that the living Vietnamese families lead.

However, Lisa reminds us that things aren’t so simple. After the Vietnamese government overthrew the Pol Pot regime in 1979, by 1980, the Vietnamese government declared that the Cambodian people seeking refuge in Vietnam were only temporary. Thus, her father and brother were sent to Cu Chi, a refugee camp outside of Ho Chi Minh City, while Lisa, her mother, and sister remained in the city to work. It is interesting to note that despite the danger and instability that her family faced during her escape, this marked the first time that her family was separated by other political forces-- the Vietnamese Government. It was a difficult and lonely time for Lisa. She recalls, “[I was] alone... Didn’t want to think about it. [1:00-1:05]. Luckily, she was able to visit her brother and father in the refugee camp often, and by 1983, her family reunited to go back to Cambodia, four years after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime.

Returning back to Cambodia was harrowing for Lisa and her family. The landscape had changed, and much of it was destroyed. People who she used to see, weren’t there anymore. However, Lisa shared a moment when her father’s friend recognized her. Even years after the

destruction that the Khmer Rouge genocide wreaked upon the civilian lives, she was able to share a warm moment with her old family friend. He rejoiced in how much older she had gotten.

In 1990, Lisa remarked that it was the happiest period of her life. She was able to secure a stable job at a local casino. Due to her life experience of being displaced so many times and having a Chinese-Vietnamese father and a Cambodian mother, she was adept at speaking many languages. However, this was the case not because she went to school, but because her survival demanded it. When thinking about 1990's economy in a global context, it makes sense that this moment is a happy period in her life. Post Viet Nam War and Post Khmer Rouge, these countries are highly unstable and insufficient to sustain itself. Although the Association of Southeast Asian Nations ASEAN was created in 1967, the organization was utilized under Bill Clinton's Administration in 1983 when he postulated that, "Southeast Asia as a peaceful region of energetic economic growth" (Mauzy and Job, 2007).

Lisa's story follows a narrative arc that traces redemption through mobility-- a mobility that is both physical and political. In other words, her story starts off in Cambodia with suffering and ends up in America with a second rebirth. Although that's not to say that America doesn't come without its challenges. In Lisa's words, "I was dead before, but now I'm alive again. Life in 1975 was different than life now." The Viet Nam War forced many individuals to grapple with questions of identity and belonging-- whether one's loyalty belonged to one's family, political cause, social stratum, or geographical location. Since these identities are complex and often complicate one another, it is hard to formulate a conception of the Viet Nam War in a linear single minded fashion that the West often does in terms of binaries: North and South, communist and capitalist, white and yellow. On that same line, Lisa Chhin grapples with her own ethnic,

national, and personal identity. Thus, while it would be a mistake to classify these individuals as a singular identity. However, that does not deny that these diverse and complex individuals don't share something in common: that in a historically Vietnamese context that these civilian individuals and people of the country remain resilient and dignified until they are able to attain their sovereignty as free peoples.

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INTERVIEW REFLECTION

The only time I was able to learn and gain any semblance of what life was like in Southeast Asia was through my parents' own limited expressions of their life in Laos. I didn't get to learn about their past until recently and most of it still remains uncovered. My father is Lao-Vietnamese; Lao by his place of birth, Vietnamese by blood. His either moved or fled to Laos before he was born, in 1963. After recently learning that his family is from North Vietnam and not South Vietnam, which I for some reason always assumed we were South Vietnamese, I can infer that his family left for Laos to seek refuge from the instabilities happening in North Vietnam. However, these can only be postulations. Unfortunately, he never asked his own father about the family's history before he passed. My mom is Lao and Thai-Essan, and she was born in 1973. Her father was a local policeman, so I'm sure he might've had knowledge about any political goings on at the time. When I was younger, she has often told me about her life in the refugee camps. At that young age, I always regarded them as a mother's tale to inscribe in her daughter the ease and privilege that I have to be born in America. Now that I'm older, I didn't realize that the presence of refugee camps was the consequence of a war-torn country. She might've had so many connections to individuals from Cambodia and Vietnam. Since my parents didn't ask their parents much about the family history, I've made it my own task to ask and receive as they are willing to tell me.

I provided this backstory to provide a framework for how I approached the interview with Lisa. It was a remarkable feeling to gain, first hand, the stories from an individual who lived through the period of the atrocities in Southeast Asia. For one, resources are hard to find merely

because the United States did a poor job in reporting, accurately information about their presence in Southeast Asia. Moreover, if they did express information, it would be in a Western lens or framework. Therefore, Lisa Chhin, as a woman Cambodian-Chinese-Vietnamese individual, who has lived resiliently enough to tell me her story is absolutely rewarding.

Often when the chance arises to speak to someone who has been through so much struggle and toil, one desires a “one thing you learned from this experience” type of response. At least, that was what I was most eager to hear. In my mind, I thought, if there is anything I can learn about life from Lisa, it must be optimistic. Afterall, she had survived death and persisted through all of the struggles waned against her. However, when I asked this exact question, I was left with “nothing.” Indeed, this was a profound response and quite harrowing. It revealed to me, that even within all of her suffering, there is never anything to be gained from war. To her and many Cambodian civilians, it didn’t make sense. All it did was take the lives of the people she loved and disrupted the country. Nevertheless, I think something in Lisa’s eyes when she illustrates her life in America and the lessons she’s instilled in Kaley and I about never wasting food, I think there is something to be gained from that.