



The Art of Telling Vietnamese Refugee Stories

AGENDA

This year Vietnam marked the 40th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. SHEILA PHAM looks at different ways of telling the stories of refugees from the war and what became of them afterwards in new lands.

It was a pivotal moment when the South Vietnamese government fell on 30 April 1975, triggering a long chain of events around the world. For Australia, the Vietnam War was hugely significant; not only because a large number of Australians fought and served in the war, but also because it was embedded in great social change sweeping across the country.

Forty years on, the war continues to have a complex legacy, not least of which was the subsequent refugee crisis that led to an overhaul of Australia's refugee program.

In May 1975, the first boatload of people left Vietnam. They were the first of hundreds of thousands that fled over the following years. By late 1975, the first 400 Vietnamese refugees were selected to be resettled in Australia from camps in Guam, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia.

The scale of the refugee crisis was unprecedented, and the Australian Senate initiated a Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence to develop the appropriate national response. In 1976, the committee's report *Australia and the Refugee Problem* recommended that the Vietnamese were settled as refugees rather than "normal migrants" and that in order for this to happen there needed to be a new refugee resettlement policy. What followed was the introduction of a suite of services including housing, education and other sources of social support. According to the Refugee Council of Australia: "This report [Australia and the Refugee Problem] marked the beginning of new thinking which transformed the national refugee program from the humanitarian element of a general migration program to a dedicated

and planned humanitarian program supported by a sophisticated system of settlement support."

100,000 Vietnamese refugees were eventually resettled in Australia; of those only 2000 came directly by boat. Countless others perished along the way.

I know all of this second-hand rather than first since it was my parents and extended family who left Vietnam. Nonetheless their story of escape is one that I've told publicly in live performance and on-air, and I'm constantly grappling with the question: What's the best way for me - an Australian with Vietnamese heritage - to tell these stories? Beyond their story of escape, how do I tease out some of the other stories from decades of Vietnamese resettlement in Australia? In what ways does the past relate to the present?

Another person who has become similarly interested in these issues is Phuong Ngo, a Melbourne-based artist. Born and raised in Australia, Ngo also grew up feeling somewhat disconnected from his family's rich culture and transnational history. His art practice goes across different media including photography, video and installation.

It involves him delving deep into his family's past, exploring the many intersections of history and identity. His work focuses on issues such as representation, and demonstrates how the personal is not only political, but also belongs to much grander narratives.

One of Ngo's works, 'My Dad the People Smuggler', involved him retracing the steps of his family who left Vietnam in 1981. His father organised numerous boats leaving the country and in his quest to learn more about that chapter of his father's life, he recently revisited a Malaysian refugee camp on Pulau Bidong.

*Notes from artist Phuong Ngo about
his visit to Pulau Bidong in 2012*

Hello from Merang, Kuala Terengganu, launching point to a plethora of five star beach resorts, tropical islands and countless beaches; it is also the starting point for my excursion to Pulau Bidong Refugee Camp.

You may or may not be aware of this, but my artistic practice is very meticulously organised - I have timetables, plans and conduct extensive research. However, the reality of this carefully - planned expedition has caused me to reconsider my overly structured working methodology.

It is well and good to have plans and visions of what I hoped to achieve on this trip, but all the best-laid plans in the world could not prepare me for the emotional reality of visiting an abandoned refugee camp that housed my family 30 years ago.

For some reason I had expected this to be easy. Coincidentally, the day I arrived at the site also happened to be my father's birthday, which led to a few weepy moments alone in a forest clearing, recalling the series of interviews I had had with him in the 6 months leading to that day.

The day started with a quick drive to Merang jetty, where I waited for the boat to take me to the island. Once on the boat it was a quick and very bumpy ride to the island. Upon arrival, I immediately recognised particular monuments and details that still existed from the few photos that my parents had taken of the camp in 1981. After taking a few minutes to calm my nerves on the jetty by stopping to examine the clear tropical waters brimming with colourful fish, coral and other sea life (blissfully unaware of the significance of their habitat), I headed inland, towards what remained of the Vietnamese settlement.

Closed in 1991, the camp has been left to return to nature, but not before being pillaged by the locals. Nails, nuts and bolts had been removed; usable wood had been salvaged for housing, while now-headless Buddhas guard the concrete steps leading down to a secluded beach.

Whilst some travellers I encountered expressed dismay that the site had not been preserved for its historicity, I felt that there was something romantic in the idea that the locals had utilised materials salvaged from a site of political shelter to build their own social shelters, so that even as the site was returning to its natural pre-1975 state, parts of it lived on, thus unintentionally perpetuating the life of the refugee camp.

I made my way through the camp by a path that snakes around the island, but found that most of it was inaccessible and had been reclaimed by the forest. However, the biggest obstacle I encountered in collecting material to make this artwork was the sense that the camera was getting in the way of my experience, so I made the decision to shoot mostly video, which then allowed me 5-10 minutes of silence to absorb the experience while the camera recorded. At this point, I am still not sure what I have managed to capture, or what I will produce, but I think that the point of this trip was to share in the experience of my elders.

As I am still trying to process the implications of this trip for myself, I must keep this short. I have been staying at a nearby resort for 4 days now, and it is only after visiting the camp yesterday that I have come to realise that the island I can see from my balcony is actually Pulau Bidong.

Needless to say, I have been humbled by a number of realisations on this trip, and chief amongst those is the revelation that although I am thoroughly grateful and have gone to great lengths to understand where I came from, I will never fully comprehend what my parents suffered and persevered through to give my siblings and I what we have today.

To make up for this vast chasm in understanding, I realise that I must instead succeed in telling their stories and making sure they are heard.



Pulau Bidong 2012. PHOTO: Phuong T.H. Ngo

In Ngo's notes, I particularly relate to his sentiment of creating work that is about sharing "in the experience of my elders". It's also something I think about as a writer, trying my best to interpret experiences from the past.

This is also the same camp my family ended up in, along with more than a quarter of a million other Vietnamese refugees. From 8 August 1978 the United Nations (UN) administered a refugee camp on the island until it officially closed on 31 October 1991. By that stage there were still several thousand people and the remaining inhabitants were forced to repatriate in Vietnam. It defies imagination to see how so many people passed through a small site around one square kilometre in area.

Forty years after the war, the island off the coast of Malaysia still looms large in the memories of those who stayed there for a time. Since 1999, the former refugee camp has begun to welcome visitors, an example of what could be called a 'dark tourist' destination.

Growing up, I would hear Pulau Bidong simply referred to as 'dao', meaning 'island' in Vietnamese. The Island. As a child I had no sense of its geography or its place in the greater scheme of things; no concept that

it was one of the main refugee camps set up in the aftermath of the war and that my family were part of one of the world's great exoduses in recent times.

I recently found a photo from Pulau Bidong in an old album of my parents and they were just as surprised by it as I am because they had seemingly forgotten that the photo existed.

They're standing in a large group and they're smiling, happy to pose for the camera. They look young and very thin. The idyllic picture shows little of the underlying insecurity of their situation and their living conditions. When my parents talk of those days it's with mixed feelings, with my father telling funny stories about life on the island and the kind of deals he would make with people, while my mother would mostly just shudder about the horror of it all.

Their fates, as well as so many of the others, lay in the hands of the many UN staff and other administrators who were processing claims as fast as they could and on behalf of countries all over the world.

One visitor to Palau Bidong, Leo Cherne, called it "Hell Isle". Refugees crowded onto the island and as he recalled it, "lived in makeshift huts two and three stories

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Forty Years On at Ashfield Town Hall, 30 April 2015. PHOTO: Garry Trinh



Vietnamese-Australian writers (L-R): TV Phan, Sheila Pham, Stephen Pham, Shirley Le, Katherine Le, Pauline Nguyen, Kim Huynh

high made of salvaged timbers from wrecked boats, plastic sheets, tin cans, and corrugated iron sheets. Latrines and wells were inadequate; tropical rainstorms sent rivers of filthy water through the camp; all food and clean water had to be imported from the mainland. Water was rationed at one gallon per day per person. Doctors were abundant, but medicine was in short supply. Sanitation was nearly non-existent and hepatitis was rampant.”

In reflecting on all of this, what has become clearer is that it’s easy to become fixated on certain points in time, and continually reinforce one of the most salient parts of the collective story of Vietnamese refugees.

Boat journeys and refugee camps are just one chapter of a story that has continued into the present. What of the newfound Australian suburban reality that followed which brought on a whole new raft of feelings? What stories of resettlement could be spoken more of and in what ways can these stories be told? Yet there’s something telling about this fixation on the refugee journey perhaps, a clue of the major source of trauma that continues to underscore the experience of the Vietnamese community as a whole in Australia.

To mark the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war I organised a special storytelling night on 30 April 2015 at Ashfield Town Hall. It was not an entirely comfortable experience to organise an event on such a sensitive anniversary, when Vietnamese community leaders in Sydney have chosen to organise a cultural festival later this year in November instead. Yet I felt it was important to create a space to promote under-told stories of Australian life and the anniversary felt like an appropriate one to mark in some way.

For more than six months, I worked with a group of Vietnamese-Australian writers at different stages of their writing careers, encouraging them to share stories to an audience of fellow Vietnamese-Australians from our generation as well as the wider community. We were greatly supported by Ashfield City Council and there were 175 people in attendance, more than twice what was originally anticipated.

The numbers of people attending indicated to me that there is a hunger out there to hear tales that aren’t well represented in mainstream outlets. On the

night, each of the seven storytellers told different stories about various aspects of their lives: growing up in the suburbs, aspiring to be more than what they were, mingling with others who recently migrated to Australia and navigating difficult family relationships weighed down by heavy histories. These were important stories about the post-refugee experience, about how we relate to others seemingly like us and others who seem more different.

The story I chose to tell that night went far beyond Australia to Austria, which I visited last year for the first time. Partly what drew me there was the possibility of meeting family friends who lived in Salzburg. They had left the refugee camp on Pulau Bidong in June 1980 after a three week stay, almost exactly a year before I was born in Australia. I often heard about them growing up; Austria was one of the first countries I knew of. My father would often mention that a good friend of his lived there, whom he called Cong. Cong was someone he’d grown up with in the town of Can Tho and later collaborated with when organising a boat.

Early on there were letters and photos exchanged,

showing the new lives they now had on opposite sides of the world. But they had lost touch in the ensuing decades. That is, until I showed up in Salzburg.

Austria had only accepted around 2000 Vietnamese refugees, a fraction of Australia’s total intake. Seeing how isolated they were in the middle of a landlocked country in Europe changed the way I see the Vietnamese refugee experience. I never fully understood that to be displaced with a large cohort of your compatriots was in some ways a real luxury, and how important having a community was in order to maintain culture, language, a sense of continuation after major disruptions like war and migration.

Perhaps even more significantly, up until that moment of meeting them, I’d only ever met people from the boat who were related to me; so that harrowing journey might as well have been a creation myth about how we came to be.

Meeting these fellow passengers finally took away some of the anonymity of the others. I saw for myself that these other ‘boat people’ had names and rich lives and their own big stories to share forty years after the end of the war. R