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The Untold Story of a Chinese-American

The year is 1975, and my father is six years old. His name is Xuan. The Communists have just taken over South Vietnam. In my father's short childhood he has seen horrible things that many grown men could not even imagine. He has watched a police officer commit suicide with a grenade right in front of his house. He has seen two prisoners escape from jail. He has seen a man executed, hanged and shot. Worst of all he saw freedom snatched away from his country.

Four years have passed since the Communists won the war. During that time my father's family was planning an escape from Communist Vietnam. Most southern Vietnamese people were either executed or put into prison. People of Chinese heritage were allowed to leave, but at a price. My family was lucky. We were of Chinese descent. My grandfather gave everything to the Communists when they came knocking at the door, and in return, the Communist soldiers allowed my father's family to leave Vietnam.

My father's parents and eight of his siblings were crammed on an eighteen-foot boat carrying two hundred fifty people. The boat had traveled for only one day when a Vietnamese coast guard boat stopped it. The coast guard demanded money from the people on the boat and when the people refused, the guard took their compass away. A day later, the guard came back and asked again; this time the people gave him some gold. Satisfied, he let the people have the compass back and allowed the boat to leave. Three days later, out at sea, pirates ambushed the small boat. Frightened, the people gave almost all their gold away. The pirates, thankfully, let everybody go.

The next few days were the worst. After the pirates attacked, a second group of them ambushed the small boat yet again. However, this time, the people had no money. The pirates were furious, and they rammed the boat. The tiny boat's deck was almost at sea level and the pirate's boat was as big as a small cruise ship. After ramming the boat several more times, the pirates got bored and left. The bottom of the boat had a two-foot gash in it, and worse, the water pump was crushed. There was no way to empty water out of sinking boat. Almost immediately, everybody divided up. The men got to work emptying the boat using buckets. The women and children started patching up the hole. My father helped with the hole, for emptying the boat was too difficult for a ten year old.

It was hopeless. The water was filling the boat up too quickly. Everybody cried while working, men, women and children. Miraculously, the patch was completed before the boat sank. My father, out of sheer exhaustion, collapsed and slept. He awoke the next day to his mother saying that they had hit land. They had arrived at Malaysia. The Malaysians were not accepting refugees from Vietnam. The quick-thinking Vietnamese people purposely destroyed the boat before the Malaysians had a chance to send them back on the boat. Everybody split up, but eventually, the Malaysian police rounded them up again. The Malaysians sent everybody to an island off the coast, specifically designated for Vietnamese refugees. When the island came into view, my father's jaw dropped. There were twenty-three thousand refugees there. Life was hard on the island; it was like a game of Survivor. People went into the forest to chop down wood so they could build houses. My father had to live in this horrible place for almost a year.

At this time, everybody wanted to go to America, the land of opportunity. Nobody wanted to go to Canada or Australia. To control the flow of immigrants from Vietnam, America came up with a rule to try to scare off immigrants. In order for America to even consider you, you had to live in the Philippines for a very long time, to “prove” yourself. When people heard this new rule, they started looking to other countries. Many applied to Canada, Australia, Switzerland and France. But my father’s family decided to stick with America. A huge American carrier boat came to ship my father and a few other willing families to a small island in the Philippines. In total, the carrier had over three thousand people on it.

This island had much better living conditions than the one in Malaysia. It had many homes already pre-built and the buildings had indoor plumbing. For a while, my father and his family waited. Almost a year later, my father’s prayers were answered. A Vietnamese man in America had read their application and decided to sponsor my father and his family to America. As the crowded plane flew over San Francisco, my father felt an overwhelming joy in his heart. The plane landed and my father stepped out into the cold. He breathed in a big lungful of the American air, and he realized that freedom was now truly his. They stayed in San Francisco for another week and then took a Greyhound Bus down to San Diego. For three days my father and his family lived at the sponsor’s house; then they started renting a house in Mira Mesa.

My father started sixth grade at Mason Elementary at twelve years old. Almost immediately, he was treated with racial prejudice, mostly because of his name. The American kids called him “swan” and “soon”. Even some of his teachers treated him this way. Plus, my father didn’t even speak a word of English, so he couldn’t talk back. The

other Vietnamese immigrants stayed away from him because he was the “newcomer”. Eventually however, they accepted him. It was the same kind of treatment during middle school. But the prejudice got worse during high school. Many made fun of him, especially in the tenth grade. One day, my father’s algebra teacher made direct fun of his name and his English skills. It was this that convinced him to change his name from Xuan to David when he passed the U.S citizenship test. The comments on his English skills drove my father to work hard improving his English. He went to the library everyday after school to read Vietnamese/English dictionaries. It all paid off. My father was now able to converse with the “white” Americans. The new skill allowed my father to make new friends, not just with Vietnamese kids, but with the American kids too.

My father and all of his brothers and sisters all worked jobs after school to earn money, and in two years, it too, paid off. They were able to pay a down payment on a house. The family moved into the house when my father entered twelfth grade. My father graduated in 1987 and went to a trade school to learn how to be a mechanic. He passed the final exam. But sadly he couldn’t afford any tools, so no shop would hire him. My father went back to trade school in 1989 to learn how to be a machinist. He passed the final exam and went on to work as a machinist. My father met my mother in 1991, married her in 1992, and I was born in 1994. My father had an accident while working in 1996 that crushed his little finger. The bones in the finger healed as one solid bone, so he couldn’t move it anymore. After the accident, he stopped being a machinist. He bought a liquor store in Clairmont Mesa and started working sixteen hours a day for a living. But after six years, he sold the store and started working in a warehouse for Tandberg Data.

As a very hard worker, my father worked his way to the top of his section. He is now the leader of the warehouse.

When I turned five I started kindergarten at Sandburg Elementary; as a young boy I had not a care in the world about racism. After kindergarten, I transferred to Mason Elementary. I got my first real taste of prejudice in second grade. Some boys were making fun of my last name, calling me “Roger Yam”. But I didn’t care. My last name was of Chinese origin and I was proud of it. I realize that many people have had worse experiences with racial prejudice. I feel a deep sorrow deep within my heart that some people can’t look past the color of our skins.

My parents had hard childhoods and didn’t have very good educations. They have always told me to get a good education and because of their guidance, I am a straight “A” student. In second grade I took an I.Q. test and I got a high score. I remembered my parents saying how proud of me they were. I transferred to Miramar Ranch Elementary so I could participate in seminar third, fourth and fifth grade. I felt more accepted, mostly because these seminar students were more mature and they got past the racial barrier.

Having been raised in a very diverse district of San Diego where Asian-Americans, African-Americans, and Hispanics are common, I have come to frown upon racism. I appreciate cultural diversity. After all, there would be nothing to learn from each other if we were all white or all Asian, Hispanic or African-American. It is sad to see that the land of freedom, fairness and opportunity can be a breeding ground for racism. Whenever I see prejudice, I am left speechless by people’s immaturity.

Additionally, I believe that there is another growing problem: new Americans have two cultures, one being their original culture and one being the American lifestyle. Children today are straying away from their heritage and adopting the American lifestyle. Grandparents and parents are neglecting their children by just assuming that they know the other half of their identity. In fact, children won't know who they are or where they come from without their parents telling them. Once our grandparents and parents leave us, we won't be able to ask. At times, I too have to struggle to hold on to my Vietnamese/Chinese heritage. If I were to give up my Vietnamese/Chinese heritage, I would be living a lie; I could not be the person that I am today.

It is an endless circle of falling dominoes. Prejudice prevents us from walking up to each other and introducing ourselves, and not knowing one another, we won't understand the each other, which then amplifies unfair racial ideas. In time, these ideas become racial stereotypes and pave the way for even more narrow-minded thoughts like prejudice. We need to break this chain by being proud of our individuality. We need to learn about other cultures and stop racism in it tracks. As a new American, I hope I can help others achieve this goal. Only then, through this achievement will America truly will be the land of freedom and peace.