

# From Huang to Huynh and Back Again: Traversing the Hyphen Between Chinese-Vietnamese Identity



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## Abstract

Among the 1.6 million individuals who left Vietnam in the Indochina Refugee Crisis, *hoa* people, ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam, were resettled throughout North America, Western Europe, and Australia. Arriving in these new locations, the ethnic Chinese developed “twice-migration backgrounds.” Focusing on either the Vietnamese diaspora or Chinese migration, the present literature does not adequately address the hybridity of Chinese-Vietnamese identity. Exercising an interdisciplinary approach, I combine narrative with theoretical discourse and draw from my family’s migration story, existing research on ethnic identity among Chinese-Vietnamese in southern California, and literature on Chinese in present-day Vietnam. By framing identity as a continuous practice that is carried out in contexts of language, political history, and social environment, I address how first- and second-generation Chinese-Vietnamese Americans experience ethnic identity and suggest an expanded understanding of Chinese-Vietnamese identity that is fluid rather than static.

## Keywords

Identity; Chinese; Vietnamese; American; Chinese-Vietnamese; Berlin; New York; Migration; Language; Ethnicity; Culture; Twice-Migration Background

## **Introduction**

When I ask my mother if we should make *goi cuon*<sup>1</sup>, she reminds me about my grandfather. She says, even when he was ill, he would still ask her to wrap *goi cuon* for him.

My grandfather was born in Hok Shan, in the province of Guangdong, China, in 1932. In 1936, he, along with his mother, brother, and sister, travelled to visit his father, who was working in Vietnam at the time. However, due to the instability in China and the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, what began as a brief trip turned into the next fifty years of my grandfather's life. Settling in Saigon's neighboring district of Cho Lon, my grandfather became a community leader in the years of French and American occupation. During these years, he also married my grandmother, and together they raised three children in the Chinese district of Cho Lon.

Years later, in the United States, my grandfather reflected that no matter where he moved, he would always be Chinese. When I ask my mother, she says the same. Home is in Guangdong, China, in my grandfather's birthplace of Hok Shan, where our ancestors are. The name Saigon bears the evenings my grandparents spent overlooking the Saigon River and evokes the adrenaline of my mother racing on her bicycle down to Notre Dame to celebrate the New Year's Day countdown. But it is also scarred with the oppressions of war, which confine it to the English language sense of a "house," a place of residency and perhaps memory, but deprived of the significance given to a "home." Fifty years for my grandfather and another thirty for my mother, I could not understand why Vietnam could not become home.

My mother says, despite living in Vietnam, she grew up in a Chinese family and community, with Chinese culture. She learned Vietnamese in school, but she also learned Chinese. Her friends were Chinese. The people of Cho Lon conversed and conducted business in Chinese.

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<sup>1</sup> Vietnamese spring rolls

Home was, undoubtedly, Chinese. And while I can no longer ask my grandfather, I imagine he would agree. Though he could learn the language, earn his wealth, and raise a family in Vietnam, he could not find a home in a country that both forced his loyalty and rejected him as a foreigner. In my grandfather's words,<sup>2</sup> in 1956, all individuals residing in the Republic of Vietnam were forced to accept the South Vietnamese nationality, regardless of whether they were born in Vietnam. For my grandfather, the mandated adoption and recognition of another country's identity was a rejection and offense to his personal rights and identity as an overseas Chinese. And for the duration of the next twenty years, he would be caught up in a war, in which he felt he had no part. Cho Lon was Chinese, and though Vietnam had become my family's country of residence, my grandfather did not think it was not their home to fight for. Unwilling to allow the unforgiving nature of a foreign war to disrupt the lives of local families, my grandfather opened his home as a place of refuge. Clambering and crowding up into an attic space hidden behind the bathroom ceiling, not a single boy, man, husband, or father of recruitment age would be in sight when a knock sounded at the door. However, surviving the war did not mean they could keep their home.

Following the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, my family became part of the 1.6 million individuals who left Vietnam in what is known as the Indochina Refugee Crisis. 700,000 of these individuals, including my mother, were "boat people," who often fled on small, overcrowded fishing boats. Having been forced to adopt South Vietnamese nationality twenty years earlier, in 1978, my grandfather was arrested by the new Vietnamese government and held in a re-education camp for forty-six months. In the same year, my mother's older and younger brothers gambled at

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<sup>2</sup> The following pages contain portions of several written interviews with my grandfather, Shaoan Huang, conducted by Gina Haw between August and October of 1998. Originally written in Chinese, I have translated the excerpts included here into English. The interview transcripts are in my personal possession. "Shaoan Huang," interviewed by Gina Haw, 94. For further information, see Gina Haw, "Chinese Education in South Vietnam between 1955 and 1976" (master's thesis, California State University Long Beach, 2003).

a chance for freedom and departed on a boat that would take them through the refugee camps of Malaysia and the Philippines, before being resettled in the United States. One by one, my mother's friends and their families bid their goodbyes, exchanging gold for a chance at life. Those who could afford to buy a spot on a boat were smuggled out of the country and sailed through the islands of Southeast Asia, until, by good fortune, they landed on the solid grounds of Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Sweden, and the United States. Departing nine years after her brothers, in 1987, my mother escaped through the forests of Cambodia and Thailand, from where she sailed to Malaysia and then the Philippines, before rejoining them in Dallas, Texas. Three years later, my grandparents made the journey by airplane, to a country where, as my grandfather writes, there is not a large Chinese population, and he does not know the language. But life is still good because his children have the opportunity to find new successes.

By way of my great-grandparents' migration from Guangdong to Saigon and my grandparents' and parents' journey from Vietnam to the United States, I came to sit with my grandmother around a dining room table piled high with baskets and plates of pork, shrimp, noodles and salad leaves, wrapping enough *goi cuon* for three families.

Though I could categorize my grandmother's food as Chinese, with the fundamental flavors of soy, sugar, ginger, and garlic, I prefer to think of the meals I grew up eating as home-cooking. Just as Cantonese is the language of home, my grandmother's and mother's cooking are the flavors and scents of home. This is also to say, I prefer not to confine home, culturally or culinarily, to my family's ethnic identity of being Chinese, but to demonstrate that identity and representations of identity, whether through language or food, develop with the movement of peoples and cultures.

In the last decade of his life, my grandfather wrote that he will always be Chinese, but that did not mean that in the fifty-four years he lived in Vietnam, he did not also acquire certain tastes for *goi cuon* and *ca phe*<sup>3</sup>. And in my grandmother's case, I remember mornings spent sitting in the kitchen watching her whisk golden egg yolks with a pair of wooden chopsticks, slowly dribbling in vegetable oil until the pale-yellow color and creamy consistency of fresh mayonnaise was achieved. Slicing open an airy, thin-crust *banh mi*<sup>4</sup> from the local Vietnamese grocery store, she would sprinkle a few shakes of Maggi soy sauce on one side before moving over to the stove to retrieve a fried egg with golden-brown, crispy edges. The final touch was a squeeze of lemon juice into the mayonnaise, before it was generously smeared opposite the soy sauce, to create a simple but satisfyingly crunchy and rich egg sandwich.

As much as soy, garlic, and ginger flavored my childhood palate, so did fish sauce and lemongrass. On our weekly Saturday lunch and grocery trips, if my grandmother and I are not eating dim sum<sup>5</sup> then we are at the same Vietnamese restaurant we have been going to since I was born. I learned to speak Cantonese at home, but weekly trips to my favorite Vietnamese restaurant meant that words like *pho tai*<sup>6</sup>, *cha gio*<sup>7</sup>, and *sam bo luong*<sup>8</sup>, which was my usual order, also found their way into my culinary vocabulary and my appetite.

Born to Chinese parents in the United States, I fall into the category of Chinese-American. My mother, having arrived in the U.S. as a refugee of the Vietnamese diaspora, was recorded in the census as Vietnamese, *Viet Kieu*<sup>9</sup>. And when she introduces herself, she will still sometimes

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<sup>3</sup> Coffee

<sup>4</sup> Bread or short baguette (actually shows the French influence in Vietnamese cuisine, something I learned from Shiqin's thesis).

<sup>5</sup> A style of Chinese cuisine

<sup>6</sup> Beef noodle soup with thinly sliced flank steak, cooked when the hot broth is poured on top.

<sup>7</sup> Fried spring rolls.

<sup>8</sup> Sweet dessert drink consisting of longan, red dates, seaweed and barley and topped with shaved ice.

<sup>9</sup> Overseas Vietnamese

identify as Chinese-Vietnamese, referring to the *Hoa Kieu* identity of Chinese in Vietnam. I, too, am *Hoa Kieu*, but in the American context, based on the origin story of my family ancestry. Yet, to say that I am simply Chinese-American, implies negligence towards my family's migratory story. Unlike the numerous other Chinese-American narratives, my family did not come to the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as laborers or post-1965 immigrants from China. While I neither speak Vietnamese nor am I well acquainted with Vietnamese traditions, I choose to recognize the significant influence of Vietnamese culture and history on my family's experience and how I came to be born in the U.S. Compared to the temporal and personal distance of three generations between myself and my family's initial migration from China to Vietnam, the post-1975 Vietnamese diaspora entrances me with its sense of immediacy. If Cantonese is a home of comfort and familiarity, then Vietnamese is that of questions, of secret passageways, and hidden doors waiting to be opened.

Transitioning between New York and Berlin, where Chinese and Vietnamese populations comprise the visibly dominant Asian demographic in each city, I examine how Chinese-Vietnamese identities, with multiple migration backgrounds, are experienced and expressed in relation to the social environment. Through food, language, and personal anecdotes, I suggest that the boundaries of ethnic identity may be expanded to include stories of multiple migrations.

## **“China-Town,” New York**

### *Chinese-American*

I have two memories of Chinatown,  
both beginning and ending in lower Manhattan  
and traversed by a bridge named Berlin.

The first Chinatown speaks a familiar tongue, like my grandmother's voice guiding my small hands over layered bamboo leaves, folding gently but firmly to conceal a hidden parcel of glutinous rice, mung bean, shitake mushroom, dried scallops, chunks of five-spice marinated pork, and a golden salted yolk. Securely bound and boiled, hours later the rectangular bundles become our yearly *zongzi*. Like my mother's voice, Chinatown pulls me from my slumber with the scent of elbow macaroni tossed in sweet tomato paste, salted with dark oyster sauce, and topped with a fried egg, Chinatown is the ease of sitting with my mother and grandmother around the television watching Hong Kong's TVB dramas in the evenings after dinner. It is an immediate sense of home – the cultural identity inherited from my grandmother and mother through the Cantonese language.

In *Identity Construction Among Chinese-Vietnamese Americans: Being, Becoming, and Belonging*, sociologist Monica M. Trieu conducts a series of interviews with Chinese-Vietnamese Americans to suggest that “cultural background, social environment, ethnic community, and family and educational contexts [play a fundamental role] in the construction of an asserted and ascribed identity.”<sup>10</sup> “Asserted identity” refers to that declared by the individual. It is how individuals decide to express themselves. On the other hand, “ascribed identity” is imposed. In the case of the Chinese-Vietnamese Americans Trieu interviews, ascribed identity is often one their parents and familial environment dictate, whether it is implicitly through language, food, and tradition, or explicitly through constant reminders of being culturally Chinese, despite their family's history in Vietnam. Outside the home setting, ascribed identity can also extend to how the individual's ethnicity is addressed in social interactions. The language and attitude with which the individual is met in conversation with others, either of the same or different ethnicity, reflects how the individual is perceived by the other person and, thus, the identity that is ascribed.

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<sup>10</sup> Monica M. Trieu, *Identity Construction Among Chinese-Vietnamese Americans: Being, Becoming, and Belonging* (El Paso: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2009), 9.

Walking up to a metal cart on the side of Canal Street, on the front of which a colored sign advertises egg waffles for \$1.25 per fifteen pieces, I wait in line behind a man, who pulling two dollar bills out of his wallet asks, in English, for one bag of egg waffles. In response, a voice from behind the cart projects loudly, “\$2, I give you two bags!” Without much thought, the man agrees and exchanges the bills in his hand for two bags of waffles. Peering through the window, I greet the middle-aged man, as he pours a ladle of creamy batter into the iron mold. In Cantonese, I ask for one bag. And as I search for twenty-five cents, he offers me the same deal, two bags for \$2, and suggests I would be saving fifty cents. I agree, and as he hands me the two warm paper bags, he tells me these are the best tasting ones around. Supposedly, once I tasted them, I would not want any other egg waffle. His sales pitch comes with a beaming, open-mouthed smile. I tell him I will remember that, and the exchange concludes with a casual, “See you next time.”

By speaking first, I asserted my identity as Chinese, as a Cantonese speaker, and in doing so, I simultaneously ascribed onto the man selling the egg waffles, the same Cantonese identity. Though I could not have guaranteed that he indeed spoke Cantonese, I made the assumption based on the Chinese written on the outside of the cart and the experience that a majority of the Chinese people in Manhattan’s Chinatown speaks Cantonese. Moreover, in this process of asserting and ascribing identity through language, the significance of a shared identity was established, setting not only the language but tone of the exchange. In contrast, the exchange between the English-speaking man in front of me and the man selling the egg waffles was shorter, without excess conversation aside from what was necessary to complete an economic transaction.

Alternatively, it is not always the case that I have the chance to speak first. In such instances, I am first ascribed an identity based on my appearance and the assumptions of the other person. For example, when I approach produce stands to glance over the day’s selection, the



individuals operating the stand often speak first, asking what I would like in English or Mandarin. If they speak in English, I can infer that either they ascribe to me a non-Chinese identity or a Chinese, but not Chinese-speaking identity. In the case that they speak in Mandarin, I am informed that they perceive me as Chinese but not necessarily a Cantonese-speaker, perhaps based on the experience that many of the Chinese people my age they encounter are Mandarin speakers. In such instances, when I observe vendors conversing with other customers in Cantonese, I take the opportunity to respond in Cantonese and reassert a Cantonese-speaking identity. On the one hand, my decision to assert a Cantonese identity functions to facilitate ease and comfort of conversation for both parties by reducing our differences through the process of making salient our cultural commonalities. But on the other hand, I choose to speak in Cantonese simply because the opportunities to speak in and to hear Cantonese bring me personal joy and comfort, as it is the language that I associate with home, family, and an important part of my identity.

Thus, this first Chinatown, where the women working in my favorite bakery, in typical Hong Kong fashion, address younger customers as 靚女 (*leng3 neoi5*) and 靚仔 (*leng3 zai2*), is a Chinatown that is comforting in its familiarity. I maneuver through the congested streets of Chinatown not so much for the aroma of bread baking in industrial ovens intermingled with open-air displays of shrimp and live crabs, but for the brief moments that I am engulfed by the conversation of women gathered around a vegetable stand, all commenting about the excellent deal on ginger, the exclamations of another woman shouting over the street noise into a cell phone, telling the person on the other end of the line where to meet for dinner, and for the chance to express myself in Cantonese, even if it is as simple as asking for two egg tarts and a pineapple bun. If prior to moving away from my family I had passively, or not at all, acknowledged my Chinese-American identity, the change in environment brought my Chinese ethnicity to the forefront.

Without the constant presence of my family and our regular interactions, the absence of language has the effect of increasing the salience and significance of Chinese culture in relation to how I perceive myself and the identity I choose to assert. The language, food, and culture practiced with my family now appear so obviously Chinese, yet the normalcy of routine made it insignificant. Only when the routine disappeared did I notice that New York had “made” me Chinese-American, and the Cantonese language my home.

### *Understanding “Home” and Identity in the Chinese Language*

In his research on Chinese communities in south Vietnam, Yuk Wah Chan interviews a thirty-five-year-old man who says, “Vietnam is [his] country land (zuguo 祖國) while China is [his] hometown (guxiang 故鄉).”<sup>11</sup> Translated into English, the words country land and hometown convey distinct meanings, differentiated by their implied sense of familiarity, geographic scale, and emotional proximity to an individual. A country exists on a far larger geographic scale than a town, and “country land” may evoke feelings of patriotism shared by residents of the entire country. In contrast, a town is not only smaller, but the word “home” is associated with feelings of intimacy and familiarity that are more personal to the individual or a specific group of people. Thus, interpreted from the English translation, the interviewee’s statement may be understood to mean that Vietnam is his place of residence and social and economic life, but China is where he feels a sense of belonging. But because he was born and grew up in Vietnam, China, here, is used to reference not necessarily a physical place or location, but a language and culture that is significant to the interviewee.

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<sup>11</sup> Yuk Wah Chan, “Vietnam is my country land, China is my hometown’: Chinese communities in transition in the south of Vietnam,” *Asian Ethnicity*, 19:2, (March 2018): 173.

However, when I presented these terms 祖國 (zuguó) and 故鄉 (guxiang) in Chinese to my mother, she told me, to her, these terms are not distinct from each other, that they both refer to an ancestral home. 祖 (zu), the first character in 祖國, refers to the adjective ancestral and is the same character used in 祖先 (zuxian), meaning ancestor. By adding 國 (guo), the character for country, 祖國 is made into a noun that describes the place or land of one's ancestors. 鄉 (xiang), the second character of 故鄉, is closer to the English translation of hometown and often refers to the specific village or town to which one's ancestry may be traced. Thus, by my grandfather's genealogy, my mother's 祖國 and 故鄉 are Hok Shan. It is a place of which my mother does not necessarily have extensive experiences, but it is a place of ancestral significance and symbolic value in cultural understanding of familial lineage. Therefore, comparing the interviewee and my mother's use of these terms, the difficulty of comprehending the intricacies of Chinese-Vietnamese identity becomes evident through the interpretation of language and finding the language to express human relationships to place, and personal and cultural identity.

These terms of "home" are further complicated with the consecutive migration of Chinese-Vietnamese out of Vietnam. For the interviewee, perhaps he is able to make the distinction between 祖國 and 故鄉, between the broader concept of country and the personal sense of "hometown" because he experiences only one journey of migration, from China to Vietnam. However, for my mother who identifies with two experiences of migration, the association of Vietnam to "home" is lost in linguistic allocations. In addition to 祖國 and 故鄉, there are 家(jia), 居(zhu), 房(fang), and 屋(wu), which are associated with a physical place or structure of residence, a house, rather than

a symbolic home. Thus, as a Chinese-Vietnamese American with a “twice-migration background,” my mother may refer to Dallas as her 家居(jiazhu), where she currently lives, and Hokshan as her 祖國 and 故鄉, but there is not a word which adequately describes the journey between the present and the ancestral.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, by distinguishing 祖國 and 故鄉, Chan proposes that of the 115 ethnic Chinese respondents he interviewed in southern Vietnam, a majority maintain their identity as “ethnic Chinese” and recognize their Chinese ancestry. Again, using linguistics as a measure of differentiation, Chan’s results show that eighty percent of respondents identify as “Chinese in Vietnam’ (yuenan huaren, 越南華人), rather than ‘Vietnamese’ (yuenan ren, 越南人) or ‘overseas Chinese in Vietnam’ (yuenan huaqiao, 越南華僑).”<sup>13</sup> The significant terms here are “Chinese in Vietnam” (yuenan huaren, 越南華人) and “overseas Chinese in Vietnam” (yuenan huaqiao, 越南華僑). Whether or not there is a significant distinction in applied conversation, I interpret that Chan perceives a difference between using the term 華人 (huaren) and 華僑 (huaqiao). While the former uses the character for person, the latter uses the character meaning bridge, which may imply that a Chinese who identifies as 華人 still considers themselves closely connected to their Chinese roots; whereas, someone who uses 華僑 has accepted their physical departure from China and, therefore, an implied separation from Chinese identity.

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<sup>12</sup> Trieu, *Identity Construction*, 10. “Twice-migration background” is a term used by Trieu to describe the experience of immigrants with different sub-ethnic identities (e.g. Chinese from Vietnam living in the U.S., Asian Indians from South Africa living in the U.S., Japanese from Peru living in the U.S.).

<sup>13</sup> Chan, “Vietnam is my country land,” 172.

Yet, once again, my mother did not see the difference in these terms. In conversation, she most often uses the term 越南華僑 (yuenan huaqiao) though; contrary to Chan's argument, she still most closely identifies with her ethnic Chinese identity. Likewise, though my mother does not find in the Chinese vocabulary for home a term that might describe what Vietnam means to her, the memories associated with growing up in Vietnam are not lost. When I ask her whether she feels a greater 感情(ganqing), emotional connection or affinity, towards Vietnam or China, she admits that of course there is greater affection towards Vietnam. Associated with memories of childhood and friendships, Vietnam is where my mother's friends return to for student reunions and from where my mother's stories stem. Yet, none of this, not the language or the memories, made or makes my mother Vietnamese. Despite the variety of words and phrases with which to define home in Chinese, there is not one for in-between homes. Home describes our current place of residence and the permanent residence of our ancestors, and in this narrative, there is no place for Vietnam.

### **I am (not) “Vietnamese”**

Without ancestry in Vietnam, my family is not Vietnamese. In this sense, I understand my mother's perspective. However, we are Chinese-Vietnamese, an identity which I interpret to extend beyond ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam. By extending the Chinese-Vietnamese identity to myself, as a part of the second-generation that was born outside of Vietnam, I imply that Chinese-Vietnamese is also a historically and culturally situated identity. But to understand how Chinese-Vietnamese identity is carried across generations and distances of migration, a definition of what it means to be Vietnamese is also necessary.

In her discussion of Chinese-Vietnamese American identity, Monica Trieu acknowledges that there is not a singular definition of ethnicity and begins her analysis with the definition of ethnicity as “a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood.”<sup>14</sup> Though Trieu continues to provide alternative perspectives of ethnicity as a social construct in relation to assimilation theory, this initial definition mirrors the perspective of my mother and grandfather. To be ethnically Vietnamese, one must be able to trace an ancestry in Vietnam, practice Vietnamese traditions, and speak the Vietnamese language. But this definition of Vietnamese identity does not explain how second-generation Chinese-Vietnamese experience Vietnamese identity. If the “Chinese” component refers to ethnicity, as characterized by the above ancestry- and culture-based definition, what does “Vietnamese” describe? Though the Vietnamese component of Chinese-Vietnamese identity may not refer to culture or language, it is a significant indicator that distinguishes Chinese-Vietnamese from other individuals of Chinese diasporic identity. In elaborating on Chinese-Vietnamese identity, I broaden the definition of Vietnamese identity so that is not only ethnically defined by ancestry but exists also in a historical space, characterized by the historical transformations of South Vietnam and the migration of refugees following the Fall of Saigon.

While Chinese-American origin narratives are themselves diverse, Chinese-Vietnamese American identity is further set apart by a twice-migration background and an origin narrative which is more similar to that of Vietnamese-Americans than Chinese-Americans.<sup>15</sup> Referring to news articles on children of immigrants, which emerged during the mid-1990s and early 2000s,

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<sup>14</sup> Trieu, *Identity Construction*, 30.

<sup>15</sup> I use the designation “American” here, in reference to my own identity and for purposes of specificity, though the concept of a Chinese-Vietnamese twice-migration background may be applied to the diaspora outside of the U.S.

Trieu describes Chinese-Vietnamese Americans as part of “the new second-generation.” The identity of this generation is “stuck between three worlds – the world of their ancestors (China), the world where either they or their parents were born (Vietnam), and the world where they were raised (United States).”<sup>16</sup> Implicated by multiple potential ethnic backgrounds, second-generation Chinese-Vietnamese Americans navigate not only the in-between space of American and ethnic identity but also that of Chinese and Vietnamese ethnicities, relating simultaneously to both but not quite belonging to either group.

### *Language and the Performance of Ethnic Identity*

In his dissertation “Repositioned Lives: Language, Ethnicity, and Narrative Identity among Chinese Vietnamese Community College Students in Los Angeles’ San Gabriel Valley,” Russell Alan Frank examines how Chinese-Vietnamese speakers assume particular identities through narrative by characterizing language as an act of identity. Citing Le Page and Tabouret-Keller’s research on Creole language and ethnicity, Frank maintains that ethnicity and language are neither fixed nor separated from social context. “Language is a symbol which marks group affiliation/affinity, [and] which shifts according to the needs of different social contexts, interpersonal interactions, and social roles.”<sup>17</sup> Applied within a limited scope to Chinese-Vietnamese in the San Gabriel Valley who have knowledge of both Chinese and Vietnamese languages, Frank makes the argument that these individuals are able to make salient different parts of their ethnic identity to the benefit of the social or economic situation at hand. Deviating from the primordial definition of ethnicity, which considers ethnicity to be biologically and socially

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<sup>16</sup> Trieu, *Identity Construction*, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Russell Alan Frank, “Repositioned Lives: Language, Ethnicity, and Narrative Identity among Chinese-Vietnamese Community College Students in Los Angeles’ San Gabriel Valley” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2000), 52.

rooted in unchangeable group ties, Frank presents a circumstantialist perspective that ethnicity is flexible and rooted in context, history, and material interests.<sup>18</sup>

However, in addition to being limited in applicability by focusing exclusively on the San Gabriel Valley, Frank's characterization of the bilingual capabilities of Chinese-Vietnamese as an asset for constructing economic and social networks does not address the importance of language in relation to migration history and ethnic belonging, particularly when extended to the second-generation. Frank posits that "language is not requisite to the formation of ethnic identity; however, it is a powerful means of reinforcing socially and historically patterned relationships and distinctions among groups in particular social settings."<sup>19</sup> In Frank's research, this implies that Chinese-Vietnamese are able to participate within both Chinese and Vietnamese communities by altering language and ethnicity. However, in the twenty-first century and with the presence of a second-generation that, unlike the previous generation, does not necessarily maintain both Chinese and Vietnamese languages, ethnolinguistic flexibility is not necessarily an asset but instead provokes a question of social (un)belonging.

Furthermore, by removing the hyphen and separating the Chinese and Vietnamese components of Chinese-Vietnamese identity, Frank stumbles into the implication that Chinese-Vietnamese individuals must fit into either pre-existing ethnic category rather than constituting their own hybrid, multiethnic group. While integrating into an established ethnic community is a practical decision for developing useful economic and social connections, this leads to the masking of either component of Chinese-Vietnamese ethnic identity. Frank gives the example of Chinese-Vietnamese who are viewed with suspicion by ethnic Chinese from Hong Kong or Taiwan because they were born in Vietnam. There may not be major linguistic or cultural barriers separating the

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<sup>18</sup> Trieu, *Identity Construction*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Frank, "Repositioned Lives," 53.



groups, but their Vietnamese origin narrative caused Chinese-Vietnamese to be associated with the negative stereotypes of theft and cheating, which characterized Vietnamese immigrants through the 1990s.<sup>20</sup> For the same reason, when my mother arrived in the U.S. in 1987, she was told that it was better not to inform potential employers, particularly if they were Chinese, that she was from Vietnam. With the last name Huang and the ability to speak Mandarin and Cantonese, she was advised to only disclose her ethnic Chinese identity.

Alternatively, Frank presents also the opposite situation of Chinese-Vietnamese being accepted into ethnic Vietnamese communities as “co-nationals” as long as the Chinese-Vietnamese behave in a “Vietnamese” way, presumably by speaking Vietnamese and avoiding references to their ethnic Chinese identity.<sup>21</sup> This may be attributed not only to the importance of language in solidifying group relationships but also to a history of animosity towards Chinese in Vietnam that has been transferred through the diaspora. However, expanding outside the geography of Frank and Trieu’s research in southern California, which has large concentrations of Chinese and Vietnamese populations, the following sections on politics and location utilizes my personal experience of coming to terms with Chinese-Vietnamese identity to elaborate on how context influences the suppression and salience of ethnic identity.

### *From Huynh to Huang: The Political Weight of Vietnam*

In addition to the influence of social context, historical political contexts also influence how Chinese-Vietnamese choose to express, or not express, their Vietnamese identity. In the Vietnamese populated plazas of Arlington, Texas, which are lined with Vietnamese groceries,

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<sup>20</sup> Frank, “Repositioned Lives,” 55.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

*banh mi* shops, and restaurants, yellow flags with three red horizontal stripes wave in the air above cracked asphalt parking lots. This is the same flag which adorns the logo of Danke Deutschland e.V., a Berlin-based organization founded by former boat people, and it is the same flag that is today banned in Vietnam.

When I ask my mother why certain places and organizations still use the South Vietnamese flag, she tells me it is because the South Vietnamese flag is the real flag. For many Vietnamese communities in the United States, the flag of South Vietnam is still considered the legitimate flag because, in their minds, they never willingly accepted the Communist government. Thus, “Vietnamese” is imbued with not only the cultural weight of language and tradition but also the political weight of a divided country. In Berlin, the politicization of Vietnamese identity is related to continued differentiations between communities founded by former boat people and contract workers. And for some Chinese-Vietnamese, it may be a reason for adhering more strongly to a Chinese ethnicity while renouncing their Vietnamese identity.

Written on my grandmother’s Vietnamese birth certificate is the last name Trinh, a Vietnamese name. But when she signs her name today, she writes Cai, the Chinese version of Trinh, officially changed when she immigrated to the U.S. in 1990. The same applies to my mother and grandfather. In Vietnam, the family last name was changed to the Vietnamese spelling Huynh, and upon arriving in the U.S., they changed it back to Huang. It was an act of reclamation, of shedding an imposed identity that never fit in the first place. Starting over in the U.S., they would be Chinese again.

Consequently, when I ask my mother why she did not teach me Vietnamese, she responds with her own question, why would she have? There was no reason for her to teach her Chinese daughter Vietnamese. Instead, I grew up speaking English, Cantonese, and Mandarin, without

thinking about my relationship to our Vietnamese identity or feeling the need to know how to speak the language. My mother still speaks Vietnamese with friends and relatives and whenever necessary, but she will also hide her fluency when she does not want people to know of her origins. Vietnam is in the past, and when she arrived in the U.S., it was better to be Chinese.

Historically, I can understand my mother and grandfather's resentment even more so. It seems that every part of their Vietnamese identity, from name to citizenship and language, is a product of imposition. Self-organized in dialect-based community organizations called *hoi quan*, the Chinese population in Saigon maintained close ties to their specific regional identities. Each *hoi quan* established its own spaces for religious life, community hospitals, repository halls, cemeteries, and schools.<sup>22</sup> However, autonomy was not entirely free in the context of an unstable political regime that sought the loyalty of its people. Beginning in the mid-1950s, the new regime of Ngo Dinh Diem attempted to exert further control over the *hoa* population by implementing assimilation policies. In 1955, children of Chinese-Vietnamese marriages were automatically made Vietnamese citizens, and in 1956, all Chinese had to adopt a Vietnamese name and citizenship while failure to comply resulted in heavy fines and economic restrictions.<sup>23</sup> Thus, ascribed a Vietnamese identity to which he did not consent, my grandfather maintained that wherever he found himself, he would always be Chinese.

Furthermore, as a leader in the Cantonese community, my grandfather helped found the Hok Shan school, where Chinese education and language was maintained. Established by and for the Chinese community, these schools employed teachers of Chinese background who instructed lessons in Chinese. However, with the further intervention of the South Vietnamese government, Vietnamese school principals were appointed, and Chinese schools were required to teach

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<sup>22</sup> Chan, "Vietnam is my country land," 167.

<sup>23</sup> Chan, "Vietnam is my country land," 165.

Vietnamese.<sup>24</sup> As a result, my mother learned how to read, write, and speak Vietnamese, not because it was necessary within the family or community, but due to a government-imposed mechanism intended to suppress Chinese identity. And after living in Vietnam for nearly thirty years, the language still remains with her today. But when I ask her about education after April 30, 1975, when she would have just been thirteen years old, she tells me that she stopped going to school. All Chinese schools were confiscated by the new government and transformed into Vietnamese schools, along with a ban on Chinese education.

During wartime, higher education was an opportunity to leave Vietnam. However, my mother tells me, during the war only women could pursue higher education abroad while all males were required to remain in the country and sign up for the draft. If a male wanted to go abroad for education, he would have to go illegally. Believing in the value of education and opposed to the idea that his son should have to fight for a country that had imposed itself on his family and community, my grandfather prepared a sum of money and forged the marriage papers necessary to ensure his eldest son's passage to study in Taiwan. However, when Saigon fell in 1975, the price of his education became the price of his life and was instead used to secure his and his younger brother's new status as refugees on a boat headed for Malaysia in 1978.

Connected to these memories only by my mother's stories and the voices of the Vietnamese diaspora, the very migration story which led my grandfather to reaffirm his Chinese identity in rejection of his Vietnamese identity allows me to explore my Vietnamese identity while unraveling the roots of my Chinese identity. This journey starts in Berlin.

## **Berlin, Germany**

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

*“But my parents were born in Vietnam.”*

Walking through the door of my local *Asiamarkt*<sup>25</sup>, I am greeted by an energetic conversation between the middle-aged shop owner and a woman of about the same age. They speak in Vietnamese. In the limited space, cramped shelves are overstocked with red and green Thai curry pastes, cans of coconut milk, and a wall of instant noodles. Walking through the cramped aisles, I decide on a jar of peanut butter and a bag of sliced dried wood ear mushrooms.

With no other customers, the store is now quiet except for the sounds drifting in from the street. Looking up from the shelves, I catch the shop owner’s eye. He smiles and says something to me in Vietnamese. I smile back and stutter through a few words of Vietnamese, something along the lines of “thank you,” I think, before remembering, I don’t know Vietnamese. He smiles and says something again. This time I’m paying enough attention to respond in German.

**Me:** *“Ahh ... ich kann kein Vietnamesisch.”* (I do not know Vietnamese.)

**Shop-owner:** *“Aber du kannst verstehen.”* (But you can understand.) It is a statement.

**Me:** *“Ne ... also meine Mutter kann Vietnamesisch, aber ich nicht.”* (No ... my mother knows Vietnamese, but I do not.) I do not know why I told him about my mother.

**Shop-owner:** *“Ah so, aber sie hat dich nicht unterrichtet?”* (But she didn’t teach you?)

**Me:** I laugh, *“nein”* (no), then make my way over to the register where he is standing.

**Shop-owner:** *“Aber du kannst verstehen.”* (But you can understand.) Again, it is a statement. He thinks I cannot speak Vietnamese but can still understand.

**Me:** *“Nein, also ich weiß wenn jemand Vietnamesisch spricht, aber ich kann nicht verstehen.”* (No, I know when someone is speaking Vietnamese, but I cannot understand.)

**Shop-owner:** *“Ahh, so so.”* I think he finally understands that I don’t understand any Vietnamese and proceeds to punch some numbers into the old, gray register.

**Me:** *“Sind Sie schon lang in Deutschland, oder?”* (Have you already been in Germany long?)

**Shop-owner:** He looks up, *“Ja, schon 39 Jahre.”* (Yes, already 39 years.)

**Me:** *“Wow, sehr lang.”* (Wow, very long.)

**Shop-owner:** *“Ja, wie lang als deine Eltern in America, ich glaube.”* (Yes, as long as your parents in America, I believe.)

**Me:** I do some quick mental math. *“Ja, ja.”* (Yes, yes.) *“Ich war gerade im Januar in Vietnam.”* (I was just in Vietnam in January.)

**Shop-owner:** *“Ja, Vietnam ist schön – jetzt.”* (Yes, Vietnam is nice – now.)

**Me:** *“Ja, stimmt.”* (Yes, right.)

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<sup>25</sup> Asia Market

Counting out a few coins and picking up another ten cents from the side of the register, he hands me my change. With an exchange of “*tshüss*,” (bye) we part ways.

Now, a year later, I still contemplate the hilarity and significance of that brief exchange. By speaking to me in Vietnamese, the shop-owner had assumed I could understand and speak the language and ascribed to me a Vietnamese identity. In response, I had not entirely denied this ascribed identity, which was maintained throughout the entire exchange, even after I had disproven the shop-owner’s initial assumption that I understood Vietnamese. Instead, I reinforced my ascribed Vietnamese identity by saying that my mother speaks Vietnamese, despite not have taught the language to me. And because identity is influenced by cultural background and family context, the mention of my mother created a sense of ethnic heritage through generational inheritance. Due to her knowledge of Vietnamese, my mother is ascribed a Vietnamese identity, which may then be transferred to me by cultural inheritance. As long as I did not deny my ascribed Vietnamese identity by asserting an alternative ethnic identity, the shop-owner continued to perceive me through his initial assumption.

In retrospect, I question why I did not tell the shop owner that I am not Vietnamese at all. I avoided fully divulging my cultural identity by telling half the story, saying that my mom knows Vietnamese but leaving out my family’s Chinese ancestry. Oddly enough, when he first addressed me in Vietnamese, though I could not understand, the texture of the language sounded familiar enough that I had unconsciously attempted a response in a language I do not speak. Perhaps, then, when I had to admit that I, in fact, did not understand, I was concerned that shattering the façade of my Vietnamese identity with the reality of my Chinese tongue, would spoil the conversation that had begun so naturally because of a presumed shared identity. However, if the word “Vietnamese” is so multidimensional that it may be connoted with ethnic, cultural, linguistic,

historical, and political meanings, might I be ethnically Chinese but historically Vietnamese, embodying a Vietnamese identity that is based in diasporic unrooted-ness rather than cultural rootedness?

### *Finding “Vietnam”*

Laying a wet sheet of *banh trang*<sup>26</sup> on the plate before me, I crunch the spine of a leaf of green lettuce and lay it down as a foundation the filling of rice noodles, a generous pile of mint and basil, a piece of thinly-sliced pork belly, with crackling skin and just the right balance of fat and lean meat, all topped with the curved bodies of two pink, just boiled shrimp. I roll up the mountain of fresh ingredients that have accumulated before me and submerge the tightly wrapped bundle into a bowl of hoisin and peanut sauce before tearing through the chewy resistance of the rice paper. Sitting inside a Chinese restaurant in Erlangen, Germany, I spent the night wrapping and eating *goi cuon* with my mother’s childhood friends and family. Like my mother, they had grown up in Cho Lon and left Vietnam after 1975 as refugees, before being resettled in Germany. Departing from Saigon before my mother, they recount to me their memories of my mother sending them off; at the time my grandfather was still being held in prison. And when I visited the grandmother of the family over the Easter holiday in Bamberg, she called me by my mother’s name. Speaking a mixture of Cantonese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, and German, her voice tells the stories of the voyages she has made in the last eighty years.

Thus, in my mother’s place, I spent the year not only questioning my Vietnamese roots but also unearthing the relationships and stories from my mother’s Vietnam. From Germany to Paris, I met up with my mother’s former classmates and friends, always over a meal of Vietnamese food

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<sup>26</sup> Rice paper

and Cantonese conversation. It was Vietnam, the shared history of migration from Guangdong to Saigon, which had brought them together, and it was a different Vietnam which had forced them apart and on a long process of reconnecting. Of all her classmates, my mother tells me that there are some they have still not been able to find again. On one hand, my mother, our family, and the Chinese in Cho Lon may not have ancestral roots in Vietnam, but on the other hand, their identities, memories, and narratives of migration are rooted in the unrooting of South Vietnam. Just as Vietnam has experienced an extensive history of political and cultural development, identities of the Vietnamese diaspora are equally multidimensional, defined and constantly redefined by movement and hybridity.

While New York “made” me Chinese-American, Berlin enticed me with the question of Vietnamese identity. Applying the circumstantial notion of ethnicity as flexible and steeped in social context, in the same way that my Chinese identity became more salient in New York, an awareness towards my Vietnamese identity emerged during my time in Berlin. Before my time in Berlin, I would not have introduced myself as Chinese-Vietnamese. The predominance of Cantonese language since the beginning of my childhood reinforced my Chinese identity. However, with the change in environment, the distance between myself and Vietnamese identity grew narrower in Berlin, where I was often ascribed a Vietnamese identity and consequently confronted with the conflict of navigating a language barrier.

In reference to the sociologist of immigrant and refugee resettlement Rubin G. Rumbaut, Trieu makes the argument that, as people do not exist in a vacuum, “it is seemingly impossible for identity to be free from social and spatial influence.”<sup>27</sup> Consequently, ethnic identity may be altered depending on social and spatial situations, and individuals have a choice regarding the

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<sup>27</sup> Trieu, *Identity Construction*, 87.



ethnic identity they express. By taking a circumstantialist definition of ethnicity, Trieu further elaborates on the mobility of ethnicity using sociologist Joane Nagel's analogy of a "shopping cart" to describe the construction of ethnic boundaries and culture. In this analogy, the ethnic boundary is represented by the shape of the shopping cart (size, number of wheels, composition, etc.), and ethnic culture is composed of what is put into the cart (art, music, dress, religion, norms, beliefs, symbols, myths, and customs). A significant function of the shopping cart model is to discard the notion that culture is confined to a historical legacy, as a pre-loaded shopping cart. Instead, culture is constructed by the picking and choosing, adding and subtracting, from past and present, so that culture is in a constant state of flux.<sup>28</sup>

Based on this model of cultural flexibility, second-generation Chinese-Vietnamese have the ability to reinterpret the Chinese and Vietnamese components of their identity to reconstruct the shape of their shopping cart and reclaim its cultural content. Theoretically, the perception of ethnicity as a mobile entity pushes against the previous discussion of Frank's research on Chinese-Vietnamese in the San Gabriel Valley adapting to either Chinese or Vietnamese identity. Instead, mobility suggests that it is possible to create a distinct space for multi-ethnic groups, like Chinese-Vietnamese. For example, I might re-imagine the cart inherited from my mother and expand its boundaries to include Vietnamese ethnicity, defined by the context of my family's migration and filled with the cultural goods of food, language, and memories, creating a shopping cart that is also a reclamation of the autonomy to express a self-asserted identity. However, I acknowledge that, in practice, reclamation of asserted identity does not imply immunity from socially ascribed identity. Neither Chinese enough, nor truly Vietnamese, in social contexts, external forces continued to define the boundaries of belonging. Thus, I trekked through Berlin with half a foot extended

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<sup>28</sup> Trieu, *Identity Construction*, 116-117.

towards the right, across the hyphen that is the bridge between Chinese and Vietnamese, drawn in by the familiarity but unsure if I truly belonged.

And in the interest of my academic research and in the process of reconstructing my personal ethnic identity, I began picking up pieces of the shell shed by my mother, grandmother, and grandfather, trying on each fragment to see if I could somehow bear both layers of Chinese inheritance and buried Vietnamese memories.

### **Conclusion: “China-Town,” New York – Retracing the Hyphen**

Returning from Berlin, I reconsidered how the hyphen complicated and enriched my identity. In the same way that language documents the migration story of my family, I learned that the voices of Chinatown reflect the migration narratives of its inhabitants.

On the corner of Canal and Lafayette, the small storefront serving up my favorite *banh mi* in New York is plastered with lottery tickets, cigarette cartons, and Vietnamese movie posters. Neon signs read, “Vietnamese Sandwich,” “Banh Mi Sau Voi Café,” and “越南六象麵包.” The inside is flooded with Vietnamese music playing from overhead speakers and cluttered with cassette tapes. Locals crowd around a glass counter, buying scratchers and lottery tickets while the staff and customers communicate in a mixture of English, Cantonese, and Vietnamese.

Likewise, Bo Ky, located on Bayard Street, is operated by a second-generation Chinese-Vietnamese family, who left Vietnam in 1978. The owner Angle Ngo speaks the Chinese Teo Chew dialect, Cantonese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, English, and some Thai, and the restaurant’s menu is a plethora of Teo Chow and Southeast Asian style dishes.<sup>29</sup> Adhering to the family recipes passed down by Ngo’s father, Bo Ky serves beef satay noodles closest to that which I had in

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<sup>29</sup> Ann Volkwein, *Chinatown New York: Portraits, Recipes, and Memories* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 109.

Vietnam and which my mother grew up eating. Brought by Teo Chow immigrants to Vietnam and now New York, an unassuming bowl of egg noodles topped with thin boiled slices of beef, a generous ladle of the family's satay recipe, and a few sprigs of coriander is rich not only in the flavor of peanuts and chili but also a narrative of Chinese-Vietnamese identity.

Growing up, I was always 美国华桥 (meiguo huaqiao), Chinese-American, rather than 美国越南华桥 (meiguo yuenan huaqiao), Chinese-Vietnamese American. However, by analyzing the ways in which ethnicity and Vietnamese identity may be defined through social interaction, language, culture, and politics, I demonstrated a possible reconstruction of the ethnic boundaries of my identity shopping cart. And by identity as a historical and continually developing journey rather than a static entity, I have undertaken the process of re-addressing the significance of my family's migration history in relation to how I understand my ethnic identity. In a discourse of representation and negotiating belonging through language, this has been a narrative about making place at the table to acknowledge the distinctiveness of all migration stories, including hybrid-ethnic identities of Chinese-Vietnamese Americans.

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