

Asian ‘Boat People,’ Once Opposed More Than Syrian Refugees Today, Speak Out

By Jessica Prois, Kimberly Yam



Courtesy HoangChi Truong

HoangChi Truong, whose family fled Vietnam, faced indentured servitude in the U.S.

More than 40 years ago, the fall of Saigon marked the end of the Vietnam War, prompting hundreds of thousands of refugees to flee the impending communist regime. More people from Laos and Cambodia followed as those countries experienced communist takeovers of their own.

A refugee crisis ensued.

But at the time, most Americans opposed taking in the people who were fleeing Southeast Asia. Polls indicate that the American public was even less accepting of refugees from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam than it is of Syrian refugees today.

When President Jimmy Carter agreed to admit [twice as many](#) Southeast Asian refugees in 1979, more than [60 percent](#) of Americans said they opposed the move. Today, about [50 percent](#) of Americans polled say they don't want Syrian refugees in the country.

Regardless of public opinion, the U.S. became home to many people fleeing Southeast Asia. The country took in almost [600,000 refugees](#) from the region during the 1980s, according to Pew Research Center.

Meanwhile, many people who remained in Southeast Asia were subject to harsh treatment. An estimated [1 million](#) people in Vietnam were placed in so-called “re-education camps,” enduring hard labor and starvation. This World Refugee Day, three former Southeast Asian refugees shared their stories and their thoughts about the challenges refugees still face today.

A Vietnamese Refugee, Who Endured Slave Labor In The U.S., On Understanding Both Sides



Courtesy HoangChi Truong

HoangChi Truong fled Vietnam at the age of 13.

HoangChi Truong and her family fled Danang, a coastal city in Vietnam, one day before communists from the North moved into the area. Her father, a South Vietnamese army colonel, packed up the family to head further south by boat on March 28, 1975.

A month later, with help from a relative who worked for the U.S. Embassy in Japan, the family was able to hop a flight to Guam. Truong, who was 13 at the time, said she and her family members were jolted by a new reality: They were refugees aboard a plane.

“I felt like we just renounced our citizenship,” Truong told HuffPost from her home in Sacramento, California. “We were no longer Vietnamese citizens to the new communist government once we left Vietnam. We didn't know what would become of us.”

They were part of the first wave of Vietnamese refugees greeted at an Air Force base in Guam, where U.S. Marines and the Red Cross were just setting up a refugee camp with tents and outhouses. Staff handed out McDonald's fast food to the newly arrived refugees. Truong — who would eventually go on to work in state government — says it was the first time she had tasted pickles and mustard.

“It was the dawn of a new day — on so many levels. I remember wanting to kiss the ground. To be in a free land,” she said.

After spending three months in another refugee camp in San Diego, the family found sponsors in Wyoming, where a lodge owner offered them housing and work.

But the family’s one-month stay basically amounted to exploitation, Truong said. They had to cook and clean and were confined to quarters that were essentially a crawl space. They ended up receiving no pay for their work around the lodge.

“All I can say is we were being exploited, taken advantage of and oppressed,” she said.

The family was eventually able to move to Fresno with the help of a church and refugee relocation services. Truong enrolled in school, but says the school district was not sure how to deal with her family. “I was put in elementary school when I was supposed to be in ninth grade. That was how they dealt with ESL,” she said.

She was eventually promoted to her proper grade level with the help of her dad and school counselors.

Truong’s parents settled into work, with her father finding a position as a janitor. Later, he and some of her siblings worked on a seat belt manufacturing assembly line.

Her mother hadn’t received an education beyond elementary school because it hadn’t been safe for girls to travel to school in her rural Vietnamese village.

These anecdotes illustrate Truong’s belief that most refugees are thankful for opportunities they receive — and that many face unfair biases, she said.

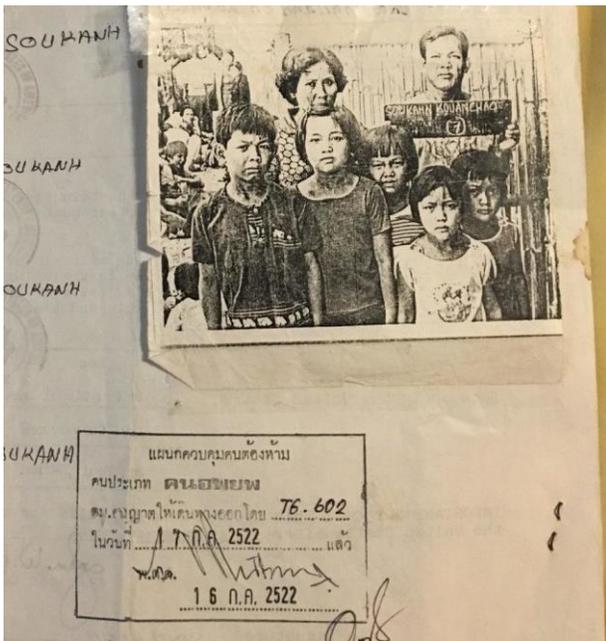
Still, Truong said she understands why some people might be insecure about changing demographics, and she attributes misunderstandings to a lack of awareness.

“Anthropologically, we don’t like seeing strange people from other tribes coming in. It’s a security threat,” she said. “But it’s a lack of understanding to feel like you’re going to get outcompeted.”

Truong, who is now 55, recently left her job working for the California Office of Emergency Services and went on to write a book about growing up in America as a Vietnamese refugee. She said her goal as a writer and advocate is to get refugees and immigrants talking with those who oppose them.

“I’m challenging both sides. You don’t have to love someone, and you can disagree,” she said. “If you feel like you have to prove yourself, don’t take it as personal burden but take it as challenge to reverse opinion that’s been perpetuated by erroneous information. People all want the same things for themselves and their children. Everyone wants to live — and live in dignity.”

A Refugee From Laos On Overcoming Anxiety, Fear, Racism



Courtesy Ketmani Kouanchao

Ketmani Kouanchao’s family stayed at Napho Camp, a refugee camp in Thailand’s Ubon Province.

In 1978 three years after the fall of Saigon, Ketmani Kouanchao’s parents built three ponds in the family’s backyard in Laos. She thought they were raising fish, but she’d later find out her parents were forcing her to learn to swim.

Kouanchao’s parents were planning for the family to flee, and they’d heard horror stories about guides demanding extra money to help refugees cross the Mekong River. If refugees couldn’t pay, the guides would capsize their boats on purpose, Kouanchao told HuffPost.

Her father, who was a military captain for the Royal Lao Army — aligned with what had been South Vietnam — had trained in Texas in 1975. When he returned to Laos, he had

been forced to do hard labor at a re-education camp, Kouanchao explained. Because of his training with Americans, he was deemed a traitor, released from the camp and blacklisted by the new regime. This left the family with no choice but to leave.

Refugees were also fleeing Laos as a result of a civil war and America's heavy bombing of the country in attempt to isolate communist forces during the Vietnam War. About [30 percent of the country's existing bombs](#) remain undetonated today.

Kouanchao, her parents and her four siblings crossed the Mekong River to Thailand by canoe. They stayed in a banana orchard for the night and slept on the ground without so much as a tent. In the morning, they ate sticky rice and were sent from detention center to detention center because they were undocumented.

"We were taking showers with criminals," Kouanchao said.

The family was finally transported to a refugee camp in Ubon province in northern Thailand. Because Kouanchao's father knew English, he became an interpreter for the camp, which had a dirt floor and gave out rationed meat that contained maggots.

In 1979, Kouanchao's family finally immigrated to the U.S. She recalls being forced to recount her life story to immigration authorities who made sure her details matched those of her parents.

The family eventually ended up in Minneapolis with the help of a refugee relocation service based in the U.S. "I still have the UNICEF bag from when we landed in the Minneapolis airport," she said.

Kouanchao's mom took a job as a housekeeper and her dad went to vocational school. She entered elementary school in South Minneapolis, where a number of Hmong and Laotian refugee families had been relocated.

Kouanchao said classmates called her a "Chink" and that there were also conflicts between refugees.

"You internalize what happened and start hating yourself and other people who look like you," she said. "I thought I could exclude myself [from other refugees], so that white people wouldn't think I belonged to [the refugee] group."

Kouanchao said growing up in Minneapolis was difficult and that she didn't have a role model because she didn't see an Asian person in a position of authority until she went to the University of Minnesota.

"It was then that I started knowing who I am and not feeling ashamed and embarrassed," she said.

Now, Kouanchao works at Pasadena City College in California as an associate dean of special services, helping disadvantaged students, including those with disabilities or living in poverty. She said hardship led her to where she is today.

"My education has empowered me to advocate for the marginalized and those who can't advocate for themselves," she said.

Rhetoric that paints immigrants and refugees as dangerous is damaging, Kouanchao said, and she wants people to learn from her experience.

"People have lost their empathy. You can't just say Muslims are bad or refugees are bad because they come from these countries," she said. "There are a lot of innocent people who are refugees, and given the opportunity, [they] would give back 100 times more than what was given to them."

A Vietnamese Refugee On The American Dream

Friends and family had been celebrating Tet, the Vietnamese New Year's festival, the night before. To him, loud noises didn't seem like anything out of the ordinary — just another night of a celebration, he told HuffPost. But as the sounds continued, he saw people taking shelter under their beds. The noises were actually gunfire from the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong attack on the South — the Tet Offensive of 1968 that would result in massive casualties on all sides.

Bui said this was his most striking memory from the Vietnam War, which came to symbolize his time in the country. After Saigon fell, Bui's family endured several painful incidents, including his father's forced stay at a re-education camp, and he and some of his siblings decided to leave.



Courtesy of Andy Bui

Andy Bui still remembers the “firecracker” shots he heard when he was 5 years old in his hometown in South Vietnam.

While his mother and a sister stayed behind, Bui and his other siblings fled late one night and eventually piled onto a river boat — a hazardous escape, since they risked falling victim to pirate attacks and death by [drowning or dehydration](#).

Bui, who was 17 at the time, said he knew a life elsewhere could mean a life away from oppression. Still, he felt a profound sadness in the first hours after leaving Vietnam, he told HuffPost.

“I was leaving the only country I ever loved,” Bui said, “So when the sun rose on the ocean, we still caught a glimpse of Vietnam — of the land. And the feeling was certainly painful to know we might never see that land again in our lives.”

Bui and the others in his boat were rescued by the German NGO Cap Anamur and brought to a refugee camp in Singapore, where he stayed for three months. Finally, in the summer of 1980, Bui and his siblings took a plane to the U.S. They settled in Arlington, Virginia, where they started their new lives.



Courtesy of Vivien Bui
Andy Bui and his family.

Bui worked as a dishwasher, stock boy and janitor while attending Northern Virginia Community College. Eventually, he went to the University of Illinois at Chicago, where he majored in electrical engineering and computer science.

Though it wasn't easy, Bui said he and many of his immigrant peers were more than willing to do the work. He understood that as a refugee, he'd encounter many obstacles, but he was simply grateful to live free of fear.

“We knew the sky was the limit, but we looked at the sky one level at a time. The level we could see at that time didn't have home ownership, didn't have opportunities to own your own business,” Bui explained. “At that time, the layer we were in included enjoying freedom, enjoying the right that the police couldn't arrest us for no reason like in Vietnam, where it was a constant threat.”

Bui made his way up in the tech industry. Today, he is a managing member of Avola Technologies, a website and app development company.

Though Bui said he's achieved his own American dream, the elation he once felt as a proud new American isn't the same as it was once was. Trump's proposed travel ban has stifled the joy that he and so many other immigrants feel in their adopted country, he said.

“When resentment is misdirected toward the immigrants, and when the immigrants are fearful of the suspicions and accusations against them, the country will lose ... all that makes America unique,” he said.