

ABSTRACT

The Migration of Chinese-Vietnamese from Vietnam: The Truong Family

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Indochinese refugees inundated Southeast Asian nations in 1978 and 1979. The majority of those leaving Vietnam were of Chinese descent. Though labeled refugees, many if not most of those ethnic Chinese who left Vietnam were more immigrants than true refugees. The first chapter examines the history of the ethnic Chinese and their community in Vietnam. The second chapter examines the reasons why so many ethnic Chinese left Vietnam. Chapter three outlines the means of escape and the incorrect labeling of those leaving Vietnam as refugees. The final chapter examines the ethnic Chinese as they are viewed and dealt with by other nations, especially Hong Kong. By following the Truong family story alongside historical events, this thesis hopes to show how the ethnic Chinese leaving Vietnam were not true refugees, but were willing to accept the label.

The Migration of Chinese-Vietnamese from Vietnam: The Truong Family

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DEDICATION

To my wife and child

CHAPTER ONE

Ethnic Chinese in Vietnam and the Role of Community until 1975

The Vietnamese-American has been hidden in the shadows of the United States since the emotional and political quagmire that was the Vietnam War (American war dates are from 1959 to 1975). This group of people, while quickly growing, now has a new voice in Congress—Anh “Joseph” Cao was elected to the House of Representatives on December 6, 2008. As the first Vietnamese-American to achieve this position, he shoulders a great responsibility to represent not only those of his home parish of New Orleans, but Vietnamese-Americans in general.

Vietnamese-American is not always the correct label to apply to this group as a whole, or even individuals. A great many of those that left Vietnam after the war were actually ethnic Chinese. Since arriving in America, all Vietnamese immigrants, regardless of ethnic background, have been generically labeled as Vietnamese-American, although a sizeable portion of the population possesses a culture and experience that is uniquely Chinese. Disregarding ethnicity, all have been labeled as refugees. In the majority of publications concerning his victory, Cao has been labeled as a Vietnamese refugee and the son of a refugee.¹ Each periodical concerning Cao posits the claim of being a refugee as a triumphant story, where Cao has overcome the odds against him. Is this because of his refugee status, or is it appealing as a rags-to-riches idea that Americans love? While Cao and all other displaced people worldwide will never forget

¹ Eric Tang, “Anh ‘Joseph’ Cao: The Surprises are Just Beginning,” *Huffington Post*, 10 December, 2008. See also Adam Nossiter, “History and Amazement in House Race Outcome,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2008.

their experiences as refugees, should the label remain with them for all their endeavors? How permanent is being a refugee? Was the label of refugee correct in the first place?

Cao's family story, as with many Vietnamese refugees, is flanked by stories of defeat and of victory in an extended journey for prosperity. But defining all refugees like Cao, whose families fled Vietnam after the war, as "Vietnamese refugees" may be misleading. From 1977 to 1982 the vast majority of those leaving Vietnam were actually ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese. Their journey from Vietnam is a unique exodus that is the focus of this thesis. This journey is a part of a larger, global academic designation called the Chinese Diaspora. The story of the Sino-Vietnamese, as these ethnic Chinese will henceforth be called, represents a nuanced exodus and requires greater inquiry and definition when using the term "refugee" in respect to those involved. Additionally, these groups and individuals do not fit neatly within the academic structures created under Chinese Diaspora. What, then, is a refugee?

The United Nations created in 1951 an internationally accepted and recognized definition of "refugee," and a set of stipulations for its proper use. According to the United Nations' definition, a refugee is an *individual* who experiences "individualized 'persecution or fear of persecution' on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, or political opinion."² The U.N. definition is broad in its construction and yet the significance of its use has many consequences. Should a group or individual not be classified as a refugee, but instead a migrant, immigrant, or otherwise, then some of the international aid, supply response, and mobility may be denied to that group of individuals. Earlier definitions were more constricting and often marginalized groups did

² Gil Loescher, et al., *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: The Politics and Practice of Refugee Protection into the Twenty-First Century*, (New York: Routledge, 2008), 11.

not fit the exacting standard. This 1951 definition highlighted the role of the individual in separating from a group; whereas in the past, refugees had been considered collectively in terms of which group they left. While the wording was again changed in 1954, the definition of refugee was not restricted further, but instead gained further in scope and international appeal. This change in wording allowed for more people to be classified as refugees than ever before.

This classification of refugee, however, ultimately fails the ethnic Chinese. The historic evidence from 1975 displays a clear lack of accounting for each element of the refugees' race, religion, nationality, or political opinion. The U.N. definition of a refugee also incorporates what are known as "refugee regimes." These regimes are denoted as the rights, agreements, and responsibilities by and for different states concerning the financing, handling and care of the world's refugees.³ These legal terms begin to outline a rubric by which popular and diplomatic opinion are swayed negatively toward refugees as individuals. It is because of these legalistic associations and continued use within these contexts by historians that the term 'refugee' has achieved a permanent negative connotation. Coupled with this negative connotation, the label now carries more permanence than it should in practice.

The outlook of the state largely determines the consequences for the negative perception of refugees. Their negative assessment of refugee groups is no surprise, as "states in both the global North and South have increasingly come to see the mass arrival and prolonged presence of refugees as a security concern and a burden."⁴ This word choice clearly indicates that making a new home in a new country is problematic for

³ Loescher, *UNHCR*, 1-5.

⁴ *Ibid.* 2.

individuals choosing to attempt it. This is, of course, not to downplay the financial, emotional, and political burdens assumed by those states accepting refugees. The cost is very real. The result of an individual being labeled as a refugee connotes a lowered status, whether culturally, economically, physically, or socially. Nonetheless, the Sino-Vietnamese who left Vietnam accomplished a great deal throughout their journey and their eventual settling within the United States. How different nation states have handled these burdens will be explored, especially in relation to the ethnic-Chinese Vietnamese who left Vietnam in the late 1970s.

Beginning with those that clambered aboard last-minute rescue helicopters and boats in 1975, over two million people left the country. In reviewing these refugee labels, this thesis will look closely at the Sino-Vietnamese exodus from Vietnam from 1978 to 1979. Whether their migration should be viewed as an epilogue to the Vietnam War or a side show to newer tensions and conflicts in the region, the emigrants created repercussions throughout the world. Destinations would vary for the thousands who left. Some would land in Thailand, Cambodia (briefly), Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Macao, and China. Still others would find themselves in the nations of Australia, the Philippines, Japan, Korea, France, Norway, Britain, and the United States. Those refugees arriving in Hong Kong faced, at times, the best environment for relocation and at times the worst. Correlatively, Hong Kong was a region that was burdened and blessed by the refugee crisis. This dichotomy was clearly evident in the depiction of those escaping their ordeal. All of those that left Vietnam after the war were fortunate; those that made it to the United States were considered extremely so. Yet, though considered lucky, many ethnic Chinese organized their escape with specific aims to land

in the United States. These actions will prove to be counter-indicative of what it means to be a refugee. Moreover, one difficult issue contained within this thesis is how to describe the history of these peoples without using the term refugee. While the author would contend that most ethnic-Chinese leaving Vietnam were not true refugees, all of the documentation on their phenomenon label them as refugees. They themselves were coached to call themselves and others as refugees in order to more quickly navigate through international resettlement. Those interviewed for this work still call themselves refugees but often times do not understand the definition behind the self-effacing term.

The life as a Sino-Vietnamese refugee can be illustrated through an example family now living in the United States, the Truongs. Specifically through their experiences during the 1970s, they represent the choices, fears, and trials of thousands of Sino-Vietnamese leaving Vietnam. The patriarch of the family, Truong Huu, was born at the start of the twentieth century, from a mixture of Chinese and Vietnamese ancestry. His wife, Luc Diep, was from Guangdong in China. Their marriage was arranged, and they were married in 1929 when she was fifteen. They returned from their wedding ceremony in China to the Cholon area of Saigon and later moved to Bien Hoa, twenty miles north-northeast of Saigon. Huu founded a small brick factory, but his success quickly spread and he acquired two others. The factories augmented Huu's wealth and status within the community (see below), and he was soon able to afford a second or "little" wife. The focus of this story continues with Diep, the first wife.

Diep was a strong woman; without knowing the Vietnamese language of her new home she quickly set out to learn. While her husband prospered, she too began a thriving exchange amongst the community members as a lender, mentor, and arbitrator of

disputes. She also gave birth to ten children. The first child was a girl, the next five boys, and the last four were girls (*figure 1.1*). Their story perfectly outlines the methods in which the Sino-Vietnamese left Vietnam and controlled their destinies abroad.

Figure 1.1 Truong Family Tree⁵

Contrary to popular depiction of ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese as victims, their story reveals a unique progression in how they led their lives. Unlike other refugees represented in the exodus, Sino-Vietnamese in Hong Kong largely controlled their own fate. These individuals relied on community, family, and faith as the tools with which they were able to manipulate their destiny. The decisions throughout this journey by the Sino-Vietnamese belie an ability to control their exodus and emigration. The actions are far outside of what the definition of refugee allows. While the definition above is intentionally broad, it does not adequately present the nuanced manner by which the Sino-Vietnamese left Vietnam. This control allowed the emigrants in Hong Kong to

⁵ For naming purposes the Truong family will be listed in the Western fashion with the surname being last. Traditionally they would be written as Truong – given name. Within the family, the names given are often numeric starting with the number two. Hai = two, Ba = three, etc. Minh and Nguyệt are listed with their proper names as they are listed in the Baylor Institute for Oral History interviews.

become economic migrants, and eventually settle as successful immigrants to the United States where they have now achieved representation in Congress.

The Chinese-Vietnamese Before the Egress: Community

The Chinese, having a long history in Annam (traditionally northern Vietnam), have firmly planted the roots of culture, language and Chinese nationals into Vietnam throughout its history. The first Chinese control was established in the Qin dynasty (秦朝 221 - 206 B.C.E.) from ca. 207 B.C.E and then was handed off to the Han dynasty (汉朝 206 B.C.E. - 220 C.E.) to 39 C.E. The northern Tonkin region of Vietnam was under control of the Chinese but the southern and central areas often remained independent. The Trưng sisters led a revolt (40 – 43 C.E.) for independence that was marginally successful. Their revolt has been exemplified and honored throughout the history of Vietnam and they remain heroes of the Vietnamese culture today.

The Chinese dominated Vietnamese society in large portions of time punctuated by brief, but celebrated, instances of autonomy. From 43 to 544 C.E. Vietnam was controlled to some extent by Chinese rulers. Autonomy was regained from 544 to 602 C.E. but was then lost to the Sui (581 – 618 C.E.) and Tang (618 – 907 C.E.) dynasties. From 905 to 1887 C.E. the Vietnamese were independent with only a brief twenty year incursion from the Ming (1368-1644 C.E.) starting in 1407 C.E. A special note in history is given to Trần Hưng Đạo with his two key victories over Mongol invaders in the thirteenth century. Lê Lợi is also recognized for his victories in rebellion against the Ming and the establishment of the Lê Dynasty. Throughout their history the Vietnamese have had a tangled affair with their “big brother” to the north and east. While political control often bounced between dynasties, the Vietnamese absorbed a large amount of

cultural influence from China while maintaining a strong sense of independence and later nationalism.

The majority of the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam came logically from the southern provinces of Guangdong and Fujian. While the human flow between the borders has waxed and waned, larger population shifts tended to occur during and immediately after instability within China.⁶ Large Chinese migrations occurred after the Opium Wars with Britain (1839–1842, 1856–1860) and throughout the twentieth century.⁷ These movements were primarily based on economy and the need for the merchant class to find better markets outside of China.

Ethnic Chinese migrations into Vietnam were not strictly based on economic motivation. After the defeat of the French in 1954 by the Việt Minh (Vietminh called as such from 1941 - 1954), the nationalist force developed by Hồ Chí Minh to oust imperial powers (first the French, then the Japanese, then the French again), the Geneva Peace Accords provided new catalysts for a Vietnamese migration.⁸ Those wishing to leave the north or south had time to do so. The divide at the 17th parallel found a great number of Vietnamese Catholics migrating south to avoid communist prosecution. Thousands of these Vietnamese Catholics were of Hakka descent (an ethnic minority of whom many

⁶ King C. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications*, (Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, 1987), 50-51.

⁷ Trung Vu Nguyen, "Marginalizing Practices: Bureaucracy, Ethnography and Becoming Chinese in Colonial Vietnam" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2009), 89-92.

⁸ For the most part, Sino-Vietnamese and Hoa will be used as synonymous terms for Vietnamese individuals with Chinese ethnicity.

converted to Christianity).⁹ The 1954 peace accord saw the first migration of Vietnamese Catholics to South Vietnam.

The leader of Catholics in the north was the bishop Le Huu Tu (1897 – 1967)¹⁰. Le led his own army at one point in the struggle against the French. In doing so he was considered part of the Vietminh cause, which would later evolve into the communist forces in the north that became known as the Viet Cong, though Le did not agree with their political agenda. The eccentricities of the bishop led him to be falsely identified with both the communist and nationalist agenda of the Vietminh. In truth Le was solely a nationalist, but his intentions were often overshadowed by his megalomaniacal personality. For example, in his lone encounter with the west during the pre-liberation period (before 1954), Le Huu Tu led a group to view his Phat Diem bishopric. *Time* reported the entourage and event,

Bishop Le Huu Tu set out for his own see of Phat Diem aboard one of the principality's boats, flying the yellow & white papal standard, and manned by a crew of young huskies armed with new Tommy guns and wearing on their shoulders Le Huu Tu's own crest, a Chinese dragon coiled around a trumpet, surmounted by a star and a bishop's hat.¹¹

The bishop was known to allow villagers to carry his boat and entourage over shallow water passages and accepted an amount of recognition and fame he felt was deserved. Le Huu Tu had close contact with, and was considered a friend of, Hồ Chí Minh (1890 – 1969).

Hồ Chí Minh considered Le Huu Tu a “Supreme Counselor” in the struggle against the French. While Hồ Chí Minh attempted to cement a bond between the two, Le

⁹ See Jonathan D. Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuguan*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).

¹⁰ Le Huu Tu, <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/blehu.html> accessed February 18, 2009.

¹¹ Eric Gibbs, “Battle of Indo-China: Arms & the Bishops” in *Time Magazine*, (January 8, 1951).

resisted on the grounds of communist oppression toward the church. There were parishioner reports of communist agents attempting to use the clergy as governmental spies on their congregations. In accordance with the Geneva Peace Accords, migrations were allowed both north and south before the country was divided at the 17th parallel. In 1954 Le led his flock south as refugees, these being some of the first individuals prepared to emigrate during the later April 1975 exodus from Vietnam.¹² The 1954 movement of Catholics brought the plight of Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese Catholics to the attention of Catholic Relief Services.¹³ Their role, among other services, will be examined in a subsequent chapter. The choice to leave made this decision one in which each Sino-Vietnamese-Catholic controlled whether or not they ventured south. Because this was a free choice, the population of Sino-Vietnamese in the North was by no means completely evacuated by the end of 1954. It was through this voluntary migration that portions of the ethnic Chinese community were uprooted and started anew in South Vietnam. This process would repeat itself for the next thirty years with varying destinations.

The Chinese in Vietnam maintained close cultural ties to China through traditions in education, economic endeavors, marriage, and civic organizations. This group was not of insignificant size; an estimate in 1955 placed the Chinese in Southeast Asia at roughly six percent of the population.¹⁴ Though sizable, the Chinese in Vietnam often kept to themselves. They established large population centers in primarily urban areas with self-sufficient mechanisms to provide for the community. This pattern is still seen today

¹² Eileen Egan, *For Whom There Is No Room: Scenes from the Refugee World* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 318-325.

¹³ *Ibid.* 325-349.

¹⁴ “Chinese ‘Colonies’ Represent 6 per cent of Southeast Asia’s Population...” *New York Times*, 15 May 1955.

throughout the world with notable American examples in Los Angeles, Houston, and New York. In Vietnam, the largest populations of ethnic Chinese were in the Cholon region of Saigon. Cholon was originally a Chinese city unto itself. Within this community there existed an organization system for civic as well as business responsibilities.

In organizations called *bangs*, the Chinese in Vietnam organized themselves into groups on the basis of language and geographic origin. The *bang* served as a unifying body to organize cultural events, disseminate information, provide direct support (financial or otherwise) and act as the locus of all things relevant to Chinese culture. In Saigon, Cholon, and Bien Hoa, the *bangs* helped finance Chinese schools, hospitals, and sporting clubs.

*Figure 1.2 Organizational Structure of Chinese Bangs in Saigon Before 1975*¹⁵

¹⁵ Chart taken from King C. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications*, (Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, 1987), 53.

Within Saigon there were *bangs* organized for the Hakka, Cantonese, Hokkien, Teuchiu, and Hainan ethnic groups (*figure 1.2*). Membership was based not on class, but on ethnicity.¹⁶ The *bangs* were also responsible for the local Chinese newspapers. In the Saigon-Cholon area, there were at least eleven publications. It is unclear what, if any, newspapers existed outside of the Saigon area for ethnic Chinese. Bien Hoa, with its relative proximity to the capital, no doubt received some of these papers. The lack of evidence concerning the extent of the *bang* organization in Bien Hoa leads one to believe that, up until 1960, the Bien Hoa Chinese community was primarily associated through the capital *bangs*. In an interview with Minh Truong he revealed that through the 1970s, the Bien Hoa Chinese community was entirely of Hakka descent. Thus, the associations with the capital *bang* structure were strictly through the Hakka *bang* in Saigon. While there is no outside evidence, the Truong family claims that all the ethnic Chinese living in Bien Hoa were Hakka. In Bien Hoa there still remains a building of the former *bang* meeting house (it has seemingly remained closed since the 1970s).¹⁷ The Truong family maintained associations and strong ties with its ethnic Hakka *bang* in Cholon; however, the patriarch of the family in many instances was elected as president of the family's local Chinese *bang* within Bien Hoa.

While excelling at economic endeavors, the Chinese community in South Vietnam seldom produced political leadership. Rutgers political science professor King C. Chen states, "Although there were well organized socioeconomic associations in the Chinese community, these organizations exercised persuasion, rather than control, over

¹⁶ Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979*, 50-53.

¹⁷ The author's personal trip to Vietnam.

Chinese political behavior.”¹⁸ Most political activity revolved around the chambers of commerce. These activities included impromptu town hall meetings, voting rallies, and centers for the dissemination of political material. The Chinese community in Cholon and the surrounding areas primarily focused on economic activity. This choice reflected a community desire for prosperity that was associated with wealth and often accompanied by a strong work ethic. Had the Sino-Vietnamese pushed for more political involvement, their capital and community structure could have been utilized in order to make more prominent gains within the government. Instead, the ethnic Chinese remained deliberately isolated in their own market driven aims. This decision made them the targets of political reforms.

In the growing nationalism in both North and South Vietnam, each government imposed restrictions on the Sino-Vietnamese. These reforms would grow into policies that would further isolate the Chinese within Vietnam and eventually helped to push them out of the country through the 1970s. The Sino-Vietnamese called themselves Hoa. The word Hoa literally means “flower,” but the character can be associated with anything relating to a Chinese person. The character is used in the word for Chinese people, Overseas-Chinese, Chinese Merchants, Chinese laborers abroad, and even to distinguish the relationship between China and foreign lands.¹⁹ These Hoa were viewed by the governments (North and South Vietnam) as a threat or fifth column toward domestic policy. In 1955, North Vietnam concluded an agreement with China that would allow the

¹⁸ Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979*, 51.

¹⁹ Robert Henry Matthews, *A Chinese-English Dictionary, Compiled for the China Inland Mission by R.H. Matthews. Revised American Edition with Revised English Index*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press for the Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1944), 330-331

northern Hoa to become citizens, pending state criteria.²⁰ These criteria included reeducation in camps and loyalty oaths/pledges to prove sufficient assimilation to the North Vietnamese ideal. Methods were incorporated following both the Chinese and Soviet lines of self-criticism, isolation, and starvation in order to achieve the “proper” political mindset. The persecution in the North would follow the edicts of socialism, while the democratic reforms in the South enveloped an open racism toward the Hoa.

In 1956 the South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm declared that all Hoa should renounce their Chinese nationality and adopt Vietnamese citizenship. This initial “offering” was not embraced by the community, so naturalization occurred slowly. In addition, the city itself was renamed. Since 1931 the city had been referred to as Saigon-Cholon. In 1956 Cholon was removed from the name and Saigon remained. As a further impetus to Vietnamese Nationalism, South Vietnam had discontinued mail service to and from China in order to cut questionable ties of the Hoa with China.²¹ Similar moves continued to encourage Vietnamese citizenship, and by September Diệm signed a law removing certain small business ownership rights from foreigners. If there was any doubt as to whether this was a xenophobic initiative; the South Vietnamese president was quoted as saying, “the measure is aimed mainly at the Chinese, who have been slow to accept citizenship.”²² Anti-Chinese measures such as this continued throughout the Diệm administration.

²⁰ Hungdah Chiu, “China’s Legal Position on Protecting Chinese Residents in Vietnam,” *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 74, No. 3 (July, 1980), pp. 685-689.

²¹ “Saigon Halts Red China Mail”, *New York Times*, March 17, 1956.

²² “Saigon Curbs Alien Merchants”, *New York Times*, September 7, 1956.

The Hoa were correct in their reluctance to accept Vietnamese citizenship. In many cases the Sino-Vietnamese were not allowed to keep their Chinese names; for instance, the family name of Truong was originally Cheung. By changing their name the Truongs ensured they could keep their businesses under strict nationalist laws. Moreover, Overseas Chinese typically avoided military or political service, and this was true of the Hoa as well. Enlistment rates were typically lower for Hoa into the military.²³ Those that were drafted served with distinction; however, many preferred not to serve. Several scholars have used this as evidence for a divided loyalty between China and Vietnam. In several interviews all the Hoa identified themselves as distinctly Vietnamese, just with Chinese ethnicity. Further probing revealed that, while the Chinese culture was viewed by this group as superior, there were no political, military, or fiscal allegiances (other than family) toward mainland China.²⁴ While this is certainly not true of all the Sino-Vietnamese, many families, including the Truongs, have at least claimed as much.

The Truong family, fed by rumors from the *bang* of the confiscation of private capital and wealth in the north, believed continued conflict with the *Việt Cộng* (1954-1976) was likely. Based on this belief, the patriarch of the family changed the birth dates of three of the youngest men within the family in 1956 so that they might avoid a future draft. While seemingly foresighted, this approach was not unusual considering the circumstances of former Vietminh leaders who served within the Chinese-Saigon

²³ Chen, *China's War with Vietnam*, 51 and see also endnotes.

²⁴ Minh Truong, Nguyet Truong, Chin Truong, and Tam Truong, interview by Daniel Hoover, August 6-10, 2008, in Houston, Texas, digital recording, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

community. Committees were formed throughout the region to promote national elections in accordance with the 1954 Geneva Peace Accords. There was established a Saigon-Cholon Committee to Promote the Peace (Phong Trao Hoa Binh Saigon-Cholon) by Nguyễn Hữu Thọ (1910-1996). Nguyễn had been a supporter of the Vietminh and was later jailed for his ties with the Communist Party under Diệm.²⁵ His activities within the *bang* system showed communist activity in the South on a level that Truong Huu could clearly identify and recognize. Nguyễn serves as an excellent example of a former Vietminh leader who served as a clear and vocal communist threat within the South.

The loss of a Chinese surname would not be the only sacrifice for the Hoa. In October 1956 Diệm changed all school curricula, placing Vietnamese as the primary language in the classroom. Chinese could be taught, but only as a secondary language set (either as Cantonese and/or Mandarin). Additionally, the South Vietnamese national curricula were to be adopted by all schools in the south. This affected over 166 *bang*-operated schools within the Saigon-Cholon area alone. Making clear his reasoning for the change, Diệm said, “The Chinese in South Vietnam, as in other countries of Southeast Asia, have tended to be a clannish community playing a dominant commercial role.”²⁶ Although spoken in English, the Vietnamese translation of “clannish” held a primitive and therefore negative connotation. The response from the Hoa community was a partial exodus to Cambodia. The choice to leave the country and resettle in Cambodia was an exercise in controlling the outcome of their economic success. This control amounted to

²⁵ William J. Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam*, (McGraw Hill, New York: 1995), 101. For more see Tran Van Giau, *Mien Nam Giu Vung Thanh Dong* [The South on the Road to Victory], (Hanoi: Khoa Hoc, 1964). Nguyễn Hữu Thọ was also president of Vietnam from 1980-81.

²⁶ “Vietnam Imposes Curbs on Chinese”, *New York Times*, October 9, 1956.

nothing less than the hope for prosperity and what other nations would call natural human rights. Cambodia, though, would prove to be an even more restrictive environment in the years to come.

By 1957 the South Vietnamese government had revoked all Chinese alien identity cards. Those remaining in the market centers chose to close their businesses in protest. This maneuver hurt the small businesses the most, but the unified effort did reduce the substantial tax revenues generated throughout the Cholon area. The protest, however, did not last long and did little to change political opinion concerning the rights and privileges of Sino-Vietnamese. The extent to which the Truong family participated in this protest is unknown, as the members of the family aware of the business during these early years have since died. The Truong family, being upper class and business oriented, must have been involved in these regional protestations to some degree. The Hoa in Saigon exercised the community's economic will in order to attempt to change how they were treated. Economic aid and protest would serve as crucial elements in how the Hoa and other Overseas Chinese would face the coming crisis and exodus in 1978 and 1979.

The period after Diệm (1963 – 1975) was one of good business for the Sino-Vietnamese. The Chinese, while persecuted before, came to support the southern government in 1965. Before 1965 only half of the 1.3 million Hoa supported the anticommunist government in Saigon. As news filtered south from relatives, and from sources within China, the Hoa changed their stance to further support the capitalist bureaucracy. Much of this information originating in the north, was filtered through relatives in Hong Kong, and then disseminated through the *bangs* and Chinese language newspapers. This “bamboo grapevine” would serve as a cornerstone to community

decision-making for the coming decades. Specifically after the Tet Offensive of 1968, the Sino-Vietnamese community increased its support of the anti-communist faction displayed in a Harris poll at nearly 80 percent.²⁷ It was in this era that the Truong family expanded its business operations and some of the children enjoyed the luxury of secondary education; two of the younger girls were educated in a private Catholic secondary school in Saigon.²⁸ However, none of the younger-half of the siblings was educated in the Chinese language. The Diệm reforms as well as the conditions of the war made instruction in Chinese a luxury only the first five could afford. Affording education would in many ways empower the Hoa in the South throughout the rest of their trials during the 1970s. The heavy emphasis on education would prove vital in their establishment in the countries of final settlement. In the 1970s though, the Truongs, like many other Sino-Vietnamese, used educational opportunities to keep their children from front-line military service.

The Sino-Vietnamese practiced the policy of *hao-tzu pu tang-ping* [the good son does not become a soldier]. King Chen, in his interviews with Chinese community leaders in Saigon on August 3-9, 1972 found in regards to the Hoa that, “When they were obliged to join the military service as Vietnamese citizens, they would either seek exemption through corrupt Vietnamese officials or join the Saigon Garrison forces rather than fight on the front.”²⁹ The Truongs had changed the birthdates of the boys in the

²⁷ Pao-min Chang, *Beijing, Hanoi, and the Overseas Chinese* (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, University of California, 1982), 9-19. This is also mentioned in Chen’s interviews with Chinese community leaders in Saigon, 1972.

²⁸ Nguyet Truong, Chin Truong, and Tam Truong, interview by Daniel Hoover, August 6-10, 2008, in Houston, Texas, digital recording, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

²⁹ Chen, *China’s War with Vietnam*, 51 and see also endnotes.

family to avoid a future draft obligation, but the longevity of the war made service inevitable. One member of the family, the fourth born, frequently dodged the draft and refused to serve. Arrested several times, he was jailed and his father had to pay to get him out of jail. Luckily for him, the corrupt officials were known to take bribes from wealthy families in order not to allow service in the military.³⁰

The other men all served with distinction. Their privileged status allowed them good positions with the Air Force base centrally located in Bien Hoa. Minh Truong was flown to California for training in teletype operation for flash traffic. His language skills (fluent in Vietnamese, Mandarin, Cantonese, and French) quickly adapted to English for his position within the air service intelligence network. Bay Truong was also trained state-side. In an ironic foreshadowing of the state in which he would emigrate to, Bay was flown to San Antonio, Texas for training as a radar operator and air traffic controller for the South Vietnamese Air Force (also stationed in Bien Hoa).³¹

The women were also not outside of service. Some taught, some worked at the family business, but Tam worked as a secretary for the Air Force as well. She left the position before 1975. According to her, she was not eligible for immediate departure in 1975 because she had left the job at the base. In actuality, permission to leave the country, though difficult to obtain, was available to her. Tam sought not to attempt her exodus due to outside influences applied through the “bamboo grapevine.” Bay was actually captured in the final push on Saigon in April 1975. Within the Chinese community, many decided to leave the country right away. Despite this, the Truong

³⁰ Minh Truong, interview by Daniel Hoover, August 6-10, 2008, in Houston, Texas, digital recording, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

³¹ Personal conversations with Bay Truong, Minh Truong as well as all interviews.

family stayed for another four years. Fear prevailed for Tam and the rest of the family as rumors of the reeducation camps, forced labor, torture, and death for those tied to the “imperialist war machine” spread.³² The Truong’s decline would coincide with a steady decline for the Chinese community in Vietnam.

The heavy influence of China and the Chinese in Vietnam often delineated clear separations between the two for the sake of nationalism. The Sino-Vietnamese faced a changing landscape in the years leading up to 1975. The role of the Hoa community was essential for information, advice, and economic success. The challenges presented within the twenty years before the communist takeover in 1975 were handled, and in many ways the outcomes controlled, by the community itself. Despite setbacks, the Hoa were prospering up until 1975. Due to their wealth, status, ethnicity, and their associations with the U.S., the Truongs were in for a rough four years.

³² Minh Truong, Nguyet Truong, Chin Truong, and Tam Truong, interview by Daniel Hoover, August 6-10, 2008, in Houston, Texas, digital recording, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

CHAPTER TWO

Communist Reforms Against the Hoa and the Disintegration of Diplomatic Relations With China

From 1975 to 1979, Hoa throughout Vietnam were faced with intense marginalization as well as increased harassment. The Chinese community in the south was targeted before the communist takeover, but actions against the Hoa became relentless. Despite these affronts, the Hoa in Vietnam chose to remain in large numbers for the first two years of communist control. To the northeast, China wished to keep its influence within the region. China's influence reached as far as Kampuchea (Cambodia), and Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea would also change the way Hoa in Vietnam were treated.

Four major reforms struck at the heart of the gentrified Sino-Vietnamese. They are in order: the 1975 anti-comprador movement, the 1975 currency reform, the 1978 currency reform, and the socialist transformation of private capitalist industry and commerce in 1978. The first major reform, the 1975 anti-comprador bourgeoisie movement, utilized youth organizations to disrupt ethnic Chinese businesses throughout Vietnam. Those that bought and sold goods, controlled markets and vended goods were selected as the targets for reform. Not coincidentally, the Hoa's primary holdings throughout Saigon and other areas had been mercantile. Under these new policies, the Hoa no longer fit into the framework of communist socioeconomic ideology. Using the youth as revolutionary zealots, the communists sponsored mass protests and meetings that called for action against the wealthy Sino-Vietnamese capitalists. The angst was focused on the Chinese business structure, primarily the *bang* organizations. Cadre

meetings were held for five days and, upon their completion on September 9, groups of armed individuals took control of shops, factories and homes in order to arrest the worst capitalist offenders, but also to inventory all property.¹

Tam recounts this encounter in her own shop in Bien Hoa. Armed officials came into her building supply shop and demanded a full inventory. The *bangs* had informed their members of the impending search, but the exaggerated rumor mill spoke of relocation, torture, and death. Following the inventory the officials proclaimed that Tam was, “draining everyone else’s blood in order to build your business up.”² After their inspection, they boarded up the shop and threatened that if she returned or if any items were missing, she would be jailed. Tam was also to report to a reeducation camp after the closure of her business. Tam chose not to go to the reeducation camp and instead stayed to watch her business be packed up into a truck and hauled off. Her shop was closed permanently.³ She was given a worthless receipt that represented less than a tenth of what the inventory was worth. The brick factories were shut down for a time as well and the sale of bricks and tile shingles came to a halt.

For nearly two years the family’s only remaining factory remained closed, much to the consternation of the communist officials. Time and time again officials offered a cooperative agreement where Ba Truong (the second child) would own half of the factory and its proceeds. The family had of course owned the factory in its entirety before 1975. The communists had already confiscated one of the two factories owned by the family.

¹ Chen, *China’s War With Vietnam*, 54-56.

² Tam Truong, interview by Daniel Hoover, August 6-10, 2008, in Houston, Texas, digital recording, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX, p 11-14.

³ *Ibid.*, 14-17.

With the support of the large family now resting on one factory instead of two, the Truongs remained vigilant in holding out. Ba's options were to open the factory and possibly be labeled as a comprador bourgeoisie, or remain closed and face the consequences of disobeying officials of the new regime as well as limit the income of the family. Ba, in essence, walked a tightrope that allowed him to not give in as well as maintain his family's unity. Ba was continually subjected to harassment from officials as well as would-be workers.

The threat of reeducation camps as well as relocation to a New Economic Zone kept the family in constant fear. These zones were unclaimed jungle from which the population was expected to raise crops far from the comforts of Cholon. Due to extensive damage from the war and general decay, communist officials demanded the factories be reopened to supply the rebuilding process. The factory could not remain closed forever, and it was 1977 until bricks were again formed. The family would continue to work at the factory, as the reforms had hurt them economically. Additionally, more individuals had to be hired and paid in an effort to create an industrial work base.⁴ These individuals, whether needed or not, were to be paid from the business coffers.⁵

Though the factory was reopened, in many ways it was not functional. The communist-confiscated factory had run off and on for almost two years, but low-quality bricks and tiles were created due to mismanagement and the lack of knowledge by newly appointed overseers. A lack of supply kept the business effectively closed even when

⁴ Minh Truong, Nguyet Truong, Chin Truong, and Tam Truong, interview by Daniel Hoover, August 6-10, 2008, in Houston, Texas, digital recording, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁵ Tam Truong, interview by Daniel Hoover, August 6-10, 2008, in Houston, Texas, digital recording, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX, p 18.

production was reopened. Supplies had to be ordered through the bureaucracy above and often times could take months to receive. Deputies were often stationed in different cities thereby removing any centrally located authority by which the brick factories could operate. The inefficiency of the new system is represented by Figure 2.1. Each day Ba would be forced to meet the workers and send them home without work and without income for the business. Regardless of the output of the factory, the business was still required to pay the salary of the workers.

*Figure 2.1 Corporation Structure Under Communist Control*⁶

Any factory under the above system would need to requisition supplies, finances, salaries, and planned production quotas from different deputies scattered throughout Bien Hoa, Cholon, and other surrounding cities. Deputies and managers were typically high ranking members of the communist party. Communication between deputies was often nonexistent. Once supply was reestablished, the factory actually made money. Tam Truong worked in the factory for the last two years of operation (1977-1978) when things

⁶ Nguyen Van Canh, *Vietnam Under Communism, 1975 – 1982* (Hoover Institution Press: Stanford University, Stanford California, 1983), 109.

were good, but there was never a guarantee for the security of the family or the business. The stark reality was that the better the factory did, the more attention would be drawn from cadre members seeking their own rewards and privileges by exploiting those in the south. Many officials could be bribed but currency could be a difficult matter to obtain. The dynamics of currency fluctuation had been wild after 1975; and thus was the basis for reform.

The second reform aimed at the Hoa was the currency reform of 1975. The piaster had to be replaced with a new currency so that the contrasting market styles from north to south could be reconciled. The reform called for an exchange of one new đồng for five hundred old piasters. Inflation and price gouging had deflated most currency throughout the Vietnam War. Anyone holding any kind of capital in paper form was quickly at a loss. There were extensive rules on how the piasters could be exchanged. Due to the closing of many businesses, the Hoa had sold all their inventory after the inspections and inventories. Their holdings, now exclusively cash assets, were subject to the exchange. If an individual exchanged too many piasters, he or she could be accused of being a capitalist and was therefore subject to immediate prosecution. In an effort to stamp out black market currency, any old piasters discovered after the September 22 exchange deadline could result in a prison sentence.⁷ With the size of the Truong family, exchange was not difficult; however, a great deal of cash was eventually burned. This practice was not uncommon in 1975 after the exchange, as no one wanted to be inspected/inventoried and discovered with old currency. Fortunately, history had served as an example for the Truongs. Truong Huu, the patriarch, had experienced

⁷ Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979*, 56-58.

currency devaluation when the Japanese had taken over in the 1940s. Combined with the Hoa practice of keeping gold and silver for emergencies, the Truongs had already exchanged much of their valuables into gold and silver. The metals were hidden throughout the factories, homes, and yards of the family members. After the inventory taken in 1975, most of the valuables were moved to the homes.

Another condition of the exchanges was that the new đồng currency had to be immediately deposited. These funds could not then be withdrawn for three months, and on the fourth month an individual could only withdraw thirty new đồng per month. At the thirty đồng rate per month, the Truongs could hope to purchase roughly 8.5 kg of meat in a state run store, or, 1.2 kg of meat on the black market. A year and two months later, December 1976, no withdrawals were allowed. It turned out that burning was the more efficient way of losing money, rather than through the government ordained currency reform exchange.⁸ Again, if caught with too much of any currency, an individual could be arrested or imprisoned. In many instances burning the cash was the safest option. Many in the Truong family used a large portion of their money to purchase one last feast off of the black market.⁹

The third major reform was yet another currency alteration performed in 1978. Once again đồng were to be exchanged throughout Vietnam. Complicating matters, the exchange rate was different for the north and the south. A 1:1 exchange was allowed in the north but a 0.8:1 exchange was maintained in the south. This was attributed to the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Minh Truong, Nguyet Truong, Chin Truong, and Tam Truong, interview by Daniel Hoover, August 6-10, 2008, in Houston, Texas, digital recording, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

overwhelming inflation that occurred in the south and the continued viability of the black market for goods. The currency reform of 1975 had done little to stop the black market or inflation of the new đồng currency.¹⁰ Deposits into the bank were again mandatory and instead of a time delay on withdrawals (monthly), all withdrawals had to be approved by communist party bank officials within each branch. Again currency was burned. Currencies were exchanged on the black market and precious metals were again purchased and hidden.

The fourth reform aimed at the south was conducted on March 23, 1978. 100,000 cadre members and officials simultaneously raided all businesses and homes of business owners. Another inventory was made and all gold, jewelry, and foreign goods were confiscated. Family members were not allowed to come or go during the inspection period.¹¹ Under the label of a socialist transformation of private capitalist industry and commerce, cadre members effectively privatized the majority of Hoa businesses in the south. The removal of capital in almost every form was advertised as a redistribution of wealth. Neighbors were encouraged by propaganda to report those attempting to withhold goods from their neighbors in the redistribution process.

From this point on, no one in the community could be trusted. By the end of 1978 all Chinese-language schools had been closed, and all *bang* meetings forbidden. The Chinese community within South Vietnam had collapsed. Most of the wealthy Sino-Vietnamese faced relocation to New Economic Zones. The ethnic Chinese in Cholon protested on May 3, 1978 and the result was a clash with troops stationed downtown. An unknown number died in their hope to voice their outrage with the removal of their

¹⁰ Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979*, 62.

¹¹ Nguyen Van Canh, *Vietnam Under Communism, 1975 – 1982*, 37 and 129-134.

livelihoods.¹² Hundreds more were sent to reeducation camps and New Economic Zones in the wake of the protests. These zones under communism organized collective farms deep within the undeveloped jungle. People from the cities were most often forced into these new zones. Most were unprepared for the labor, not fed, and ignorant about raising crops. The understanding within the community was that New Economic Zone relocation meant certain death.

Those surrounding the Truongs could not be trusted either. Repeatedly, neighbors reported to communist officials that Tam's shop and the family factories contained more steel or more supplies than were actually there. These neighbors also believed that the family held a secret cache of goods somewhere within the house. Repeated searches and late-night investigations were dispatched to the Truong households in order to find the goods. Tam, while still angry about the betrayal from the neighbors, blamed the neighbors for their belief in the communist propaganda. The neighbors believed that any goods confiscated would be spread out throughout the community. If one neighbor told an official about several televisions, they believed there was a chance he/she may be able to acquire one. The stark reality became clear when, after repeated searches, nothing was found at the business or at the homes. It was at this point the neighborhood began to see that nothing could be gained from their wealthier neighbors, whether they were Vietnamese or Hoa. Despair ensued within the Hoa community in Bien Hoa; preparations needed to be made to leave immediately.

Chinese culture and traditions have been firmly established in Vietnam for centuries. The establishment of community centers, schools, and hospitals helped to consolidate the ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese within Vietnam. When communism was

¹² *Asia 1979 Yearbook*. (Hongkong: Far Eastern Economic Review, 1979), 339.

established in North Vietnam, thousands of Sino-Vietnamese fled south of the 17th parallel. Through this migration, the Chinese community grew to 1.3 million. In South Vietnam their hold over market prices, domination of trade, and economic prowess in most ventures established the Hoa as a powerful demographic force. The rise of nationalism and the fear of Hoa control over aspects of Vietnamese society (perpetuated through the “bamboo grapevine”) developed into an established regime that persecuted the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam. Through citizenship reform, education reform, and economic reforms, the Hoa still managed to maintain or even to grow their wealth before the communist takeover in 1975. The political and economic turmoil that followed in 1975 intentionally set about to remove the wealth and class structure created by the Chinese community in Vietnam. The removal of goods and wealth was meant to level the playing field and remove class distinctions. The community’s values of education and preparedness would soon allow them a means of exit, and a means of viability elsewhere in the world. It was this hope of renewed viability abroad that led them to leave. With little else to lose from their region, the ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese began an exodus in search of the freedom they once enjoyed.

Declining Relations with China

While direct discrimination against the Chinese in Vietnam has been mentioned, there are several other mitigating factors related to the large exodus of individuals and groups from Vietnam in 1978 and 1979. China’s responses to Hanoi and its new policies concerning the Overseas Chinese grew in fervor and displeasure. China perceived a lack of respect for their role as a faithful ally throughout the turbulent war-years. The interplay between the two countries had consequences for the Hoa of Vietnam. In 1975 –

as tensions arose between China and Vietnam – Hanoi feared the loyalty of its Hoa citizenry as well as a separate ethnic minority called the Nung (located in the far north). One point of contention was China’s attempt to persuade Hanoi not to launch an offensive into South Vietnam in 1975.¹³ Hanoi had also established solid diplomatic channels with Moscow throughout the 1970s. China did not wish to lose influence within the region. Combative overtures continued and relations worsened for the coming years. The result was that by 1977 Hanoi attempted to clear the border areas of Chinese settlers.

There were many clashes between Vietnam and China, one particularly notable incident ended with fifty-one Chinese workers injured by Vietnamese soldiers in Youyiguan (友谊关, or Hữu Nghi Quan in Vietnamese) near the border.¹⁴ Ironically called “Friendship Pass,” Youyiguan was the means by which thousands were forced from Vietnam back into China. By October of 1977 more ethnic Chinese were expelled along the border.¹⁵ When Hanoi removed these northern Sino-Vietnamese, China protested. Hanoi had said little concerning its displeasure when Saigon had forced citizenship on the Sino-Vietnamese in 1956. Now, Hanoi was following a similar policy of forced citizenship or expulsion. The enactment of the policy violated an agreement made in 1955 concerning how the Overseas Chinese would be handled before and after

¹³ *Le Monde*, August 9, 1978.

¹⁴ King C. Chen, *China’s War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications*, (Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, 1987), 49 and 64.

¹⁵ Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Peoples Republic of China, June 1978, in *On Vietnam’s Expulsion of Chinese Residents*. (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1978), 11-12. See also, Hungdah Chiu, “China’s Legal Position on Protecting Chinese Residents in Vietnam,” *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 74, No. 3 (July, 1980), 685-689.

liberation.¹⁶ While Hanoi's response to expulsion was in question, the aforementioned currency reforms were carried out against the Hoa. There was even a claim by the Vietnamese Central Committee that ethnic Chinese would be aided in their repatriation to China through certain crossing points with China; Friendship Pass (Youyiguan) was to be one of these crossings.¹⁷ The Hoa of the north were well informed of the recent violence there and, coupled with the difficulty in obtaining travel documents, made approaching the Chinese border a tenuous if not a life-threatening proposition.

The tensions between the countries grew and eventually China attempted to pull Vietnam into its corner, and out of the Soviet line, by removing aid to the country. While China claimed to have previously given eighteen billion dollars (U.S. 1978 equivalent) to Vietnam, Deng Xiaoping¹⁸ announced an unspecified reduction due to the heightened tensions. During the statement he also warned that continued disagreeable actions on the part of Vietnam could lead to further consequences.¹⁹ The move backfired and completely cemented the bond between Moscow and Hanoi. China even moved to rescue the ethnic Chinese in the north by taking two large boats near Haiphong (port city east of Hanoi) in order to load soon-to-be expelled persons. The end result was a stalemate in which the boats never entered the harbor and negotiations between China and Vietnam continually broke down. With the refusal of Hanoi to allow an exit to ethnic Chinese, the

¹⁶ Gareth Porter, "The Sino-Vietnamese Conflict in Southeast Asia," *Current History*, 75:442 (December, 1978) 226. See previous reference in footnote #16.

¹⁷ "Chinese in Hanoi Flock to Get Exit Visas," *New York Times*, May 10, 1978, A8.

¹⁸ Deng Xiaoping was a central party member for communist China and was seen as a reformer throughout his tenure.

¹⁹ Henry Kamm, "Teng Says China Is Cutting Aid to Vietnam," *New York Times*, June 9, 1978, A6.

growing disparity between the Asian nations created problems for the Hoa of Vietnam. Inter-Asian relational problems were not exclusive to the Vietnamese-Chinese problem, either; Vietnamese-Kampuchean relations provided another point of contention.

Anti-war academic Gareth Porter believed the removal of capital from ethnic Chinese to be the most crucial turning point in Sino-Vietnamese relations, but also cited the Vietnamese role in Kampuchea as troublesome.²⁰ China had several thousand advisors in Kampuchea (Cambodia) that aided the Pol Pot regime in creating the army. Pol Pot (1928-1998) was the true leader of the Kampuchean communist movement from 1975 to 1979. Pol Pot is believed responsible for the deaths of millions of people within his country through violent policies toward minority groups. Chinese ties for the country also include the appointed president of Kampuchea, Khieu Samphan, who was an ethnic Chinese Khmer. Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea and the president's replacement of Pen Sovan as prime minister overthrew Chinese intentions in the area. In a bit of irony, the policies of Pol Pot and then the Vietnamese war against Kampuchea created more refugees that fled *to* Vietnam than those exiting in the years from 1975 to 1979. Many of these refugees were of Chinese descent and also Sino-Khmer. Because China supported Kampuchea this added another element to why the Hoa would want to leave.

The "bamboo grapevine" spread the desire to leave, leading Porter to note, "Many Chinese in the south began to flee from the country, and rumors were soon spreading through the Chinese community in both North, and South Vietnam that the Chinese would be the target of Vietnamese reprisals because of Chinese support for

²⁰ Porter, 226. See also Nayan Chanda, "Comrades Curb the Capitalists," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 14, 1978, 11.

Kampuchea.”²¹ Porter is correct in citing the rumors’ ability to motivate in the north and south. Ethnic Chinese in the north began to cross over the border in droves. Some estimates place those Hoa leaving the north as low as 160,000 and up to 230,000. When compared to the entire population of Hoa within Vietnam at an estimated 1.3 million, with one million of those in the south alone, the exodus of Hoa from the north seems almost complete with the above numbers. Many of the Sino-Vietnamese in the north were forced to leave. The exodus was simply racist in all its actions. The testimony of one cadre who remained anonymous follows,

My family has lived in Vietnam for three generations. I had two sons who joined the resistance movement in 1945. My oldest son was killed in the Cao Bac Lang military campaign in 1950. As a result, my family was awarded the title of Family of Soldiers Killed for the Country. My second son was promoted to lieutenant colonel in the North Vietnamese Army. However, in 1965 he was expelled from the army, and also from the party, for having connections with the Hoang Minh Chinh Revisionist Group, which followed the Soviet line as opposed to the Red Chinese line. He was demoted and sent to Dien Bien Phu to perform the duties of a carpenter.

My two daughters are married to Vietnamese; one is a party district committee member, the other a high-ranking professional in the communist regime. In March 1979 my four little sons and myself were put on a military truck by an armed military unit. We were taken from our home to Mong Cay [a coastal town in the northeast corner of North Vietnam] where my family and many other persons were concentrated. All of us were forced into sailing boats, which were then towed by ships to the open sea.²²

The forced expulsion of ethnic Chinese in the north sent a clear message abroad and severely damaged the economy in Vietnam. While the exit of Sino-Vietnamese from the south represented a primarily trade-oriented class of ethnic Chinese, the northern exodus was more reaching. Sino-Vietnamese in the north were not strictly limited to merchant or

²¹ Porter, 226.

²² From Dan Quyen Magazine, “Phong Van Can Bo Ha Noi Ty Nan Cong San” [Interview with a Hanoi cadre who fled the communist regime], September 20, 1979 and also in *Nguoi Viet Tu Do*, American Edition, November 15, 1979, 38. But quoted in *Van Canh*, 134.

trade roles and held key skilled positions in a variety of industries and capacities.²³ The above is a clear representation of the Hoa in Vietnam being forced to leave the country. This scenario represents the viewpoint of the north. The southern Hoa were *not* forcibly removed; stories of forced expulsion did, however, fuel their desire to leave.

The fear of reprisals and expulsion was not unfounded. While the Hoa of the south watched their private possessions disappear, news from abroad would also come to circulate. By 1978 and 1979 stories were published outside of Vietnam concerning incidents and allegations of violence. The refugee community fed its own fears of violence when reports were cited in a Vietnamese magazine in circulation in Hong Kong and in the United States. The magazine *Người Việt Tự Do* highlighted the personal accounts of refugees and escapees from communist Vietnam. Reprisals by the Viet Cong²⁴ can be grouped into People's Trials and Secret Liquidations.²⁵ One instance in the south (Bac Lieu province), claims that five to six hundred individuals were tried and executed by the cruelest means.²⁶ These stories filtered south and influenced ethnic Chinese to leave the country.

The personal account of Nguyen Dong Da on events in 1975 was published in 1979. Nguyen Dong Da told of five different places where communist reprisals were carried out. These five incidents took place near the city of Phu Yen about 300 km

²³ Thayer, Carlyle A., "Dilemmas of Development in Vietnam", *Current History*, 75:442 (December, 1978) 221

²⁴ It is important to note the term Viet Cong *is* and was still used by southerners as a pejorative term for any communist military unit, group, or individual.

²⁵ Nguyen Van Canh, *Vietnam Under Communism, 1975-1982* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Hoover Institution Press, 1983), 125.

²⁶ Based off an interview conducted by Nguyen Van Canh in May 1980 of Nguen Tam, a refugee who came to Palo Alto, CA in 1979.

northeast of Saigon. In Lu Ba there were 225 corpses discovered by loved ones and identified by the names written on the bottom of their sandals and clothes. The “prisoners” were hiked up a mountain in twenty-five groups of nine and then summarily executed by rifle or submachine gun fire. The other cities and numbers killed are as follows: Ho Ngua, 27 persons killed; Mount Tho Vuc, 85 persons dead; Cay Xop, 6 corpses. The final account came concerning a small bridge over the Saigon river called the Cau Dai Bridge. Huynh Xanh was hiding under the bridge from the Viet Cong and watched as thirty ARVN prisoners of war were tied together and then thrown into the river. He then related the story to Nguyen Dong Da in the prison camp in Phu Yen. Later, Nguyen Dong Da was held in a detention camp in 1978 but managed to escape by boat and as of 1983 lived in L.A. While his accounts could be considered hearsay, Nguyen Dong Da would attest to their veracity again. Nguyen Van Canh later interviewed Dong Da and received a signed statement available now in English.²⁷ There were an estimated 279,000 still attending reeducation camps throughout the country.²⁸ Each of these individuals faced the possibility of death through the reeducation camps. The knowledge of Chinese involvement in Kampuchea and Vietnam’s motives against the country therefore spread the fear of reprisals among the Sino-Vietnamese.

China reiterated its problems with Vietnam through territorial disputes. Islands in the South China Sea would serve as the focus of this dispute. The Paracel and Spratly

²⁷ Nguyen Dong Da, “A Horrible Massacre in Phu Yen,” *Người Việt Tự Do*, American Edition, July 1979, pp. 14-51. And his own writing Nguelyn Dong Da, “The Terrible Massacre of 373 Nationalist Vietnamese [sic] at Phu Yen Province, Vietnam,” unpublished typescript (Los Angeles, July 4, 1979). And quoted from Nguyen Van Canh, *Vietnam Under Communism, 1975-1982* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Hoover Institution Press, 1983), 126-128.

²⁸ Nguyen Van Canh, 199.

Islands have remained in contention even up to the present.²⁹ As early as 1975, the Chinese press was calling for the return of the territorial islands.³⁰ Through several declarations by Hanoi in the years following southern liberation, there were repeated claims as to the territorial waters of Vietnam.³¹ Vietnam's response to all of the posturing from China was less than respectful. Nayan Chanda notes this response, "Vietnam began early in 1978 to celebrate the anniversaries of the victories against the Chinese invaders by Tran Hung Dao in the thirteenth century and Le Loi in the fifteenth century."³² Publicly celebrating key victories against China in Vietnamese national history did little to bridge the divide between Beijing and Hanoi. Coupled with subverting Chinese efforts in Kampuchea and forced removal of Chinese from the borders, Vietnam was quickly backing China into a corner. A war of words continued through radio announcements when Hanoi radio warned that China was using its Overseas Chinese assets to interfere in the affairs of other Southeast Asian nations. This directly placed those refugees who had already left in a predicament as other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) saw boatloads of people seeking access to their shores.

²⁹ The Chinese have recently finished a submarine base off the island of Hainan. See most news organizations early May 2008 or specifically Thomas Harding, "Chinese Nuclear Submarine Base," *The Daily Telegraph*, May 1 2008. Accessible online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/1917167/Chinese-nuclear-submarine-base.html> accessed September 12, 2009.

³⁰ Shih-Ti-tsu, "The South Sea Islands Have Been China's Territory Since Ancient Times," *Kwangming Daily*, reprinted in *New China News Agency*, November 26, 1975 and quoted in Porter, 194.

³¹ Pao-Min Chang, *The Sino-Vietnamese Territorial Dispute*, number 118 in the series The Washington Papers, (New York: Praeger, 1986), 30-38 although the monograph deals with territorial issues throughout.

³² Nayan Chanda "Exit the Wolf," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 19, 1978.

Hanoi placed the blame of people leaving Vietnam everywhere else but on itself. Other causes included natural ones. While land reform had taken place, and New Economic Zones were ordained, Vietnam's population saw a postwar boom. Hanoi, however, did not provide a suitable means of feeding these new mouths. The New Economic Zones were disasters as unskilled laborers from urban areas attempted to grow crops on unfertile grounds (caused by U.S. defoliant bombing during the war), dangerous grounds (land mines, unexploded ordinance, and even traps set up by the Viet Cong), or without proper supplies or tools. Failing to feed new and hungry mouths helped to make the decision to leave all the easier for Hoa in the South.

Even more problematic was the organization of peasants in the southern Mekong region where a great deal of rice could be grown. Poor peasants in 1979 in the Mekong only held an average of 1.32 acres (.6 ha)³³ and they owned roughly ¼ of the land surveyed. Middle-class peasants made up 64 percent of the population and held 62.5 percent of the land surveyed, averaging 4.51 acres (2.05 ha). Holding roughly 8 acres (3.6 ha) was considered upper middle class.³⁴ For rice fields, an average acre of rice can yield up to 1450 kilograms of rice. This is assuming that the field can yield three crops per year. Even the best of farmers in the late 1970s would be doing well to produce that much rice per annum. Given that the average individual was rationed 13kg of rice per month, one acre should provide enough food for over one hundred persons per year. The reality was much starker. Vietnam could not feed its population. The year 1978 presented serious shortfalls and rice production fell 4.5 million tons short of

³³ The Vietnamese system of measuring land involved, from greatest to least, the *ha* and the *mau*. As an American equivalent one acre was equal to 2.2 *ha*, and one *ha* is roughly equal to 2.7 *mau*.

³⁴ Van Canh, 31-34.

requirements.³⁵ Heavy rains and typhoons flooded 2.5 million acres, put 500,000 houses under water and ten percent of the cattle were destroyed. In 1979 the population was estimated at fifty-two million and growing at about 1.1 million per year.³⁶ Hanoi had foreseen these problems and they were supposed to be remedied by the original Five Year Plan (1976-1980), which set the grain production goal for 1980 at twenty-one million tons.³⁷ Even by 1980 the country was short five million tons.³⁸ Grains were in short supply all over the country and there was little Hanoi did to remedy the shortage. These sparse supplies helped to fuel the decision to leave.

Though shortages occurred, not everyone went without. The Hoa, having dominated the trade market, had extra tools and resources to successfully meet the desire for items. This resourcefulness did not necessitate leaving the country and allowed many the means to provide where others could not. While food could be scarce, there was always the black market. Individuals were classified along new party structures and rations were given proportionate to the rank within the party. “Each cadre was allowed to buy 550g of sugar, 30g of monosodium glutamate, one can of condensed milk, one bottle of beer, two razor blades, one package of cigarette paper, one toothbrush and one tube of toothpaste every three months.”³⁹

³⁵ P. J. Honey, “Vietnam’s New Policies and Perspective,” China News Agency, December 15 1978, 2 as seen in Nguyen Van Canh, 28.

³⁶ Philippe Devillers, “Vietnam in Battle,” *Current History*, December 1979, p. 217. A North Vietnamese apologist, or sympathizer, he presents Vietnams’ exportation of citizens as naturally dealing with the problems the new “unified” country faces.

³⁷ Nhan Dan, “Specific Efforts to Resolve the Grain Problem,” Editorial, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, February 1, 1977, 22

³⁸ Jacques de Barrin, “Le Socialisme à pas lents,” *Le Monde*, March 18, 1981, 5.

³⁹ Nguyen Van Canh, 100-101.

Below are the monthly rations and what one could expect to pay on the black market for “luxury” items.

Table 2.1 Monthly Rations 1979⁴⁰

Classes	Meat	Fish	Sugar	Condensed Milk	Butter	Cloth	Radio/TV	Rice
A	3 kg	1 kg	1 kg	1 can	0.5 kg	---	1 each	24 kg
B	2 kg	1 kg	1 kg	1 can	---	---	1 each	15 kg
C	1.5 kg	0.5 kg	0.8 kg	---	---	---	---	15 kg
D	0.5 kg	0.5 kg	0.6 kg	---	---	---	---	15 kg
E	0.3 kg	0.3 kg	2.5 kg	---	---	---	---	15 kg
N	0.1 kg	0.1 kg	0.1 gh	---	---	---	---	13 kg

Keys to Classes (1980 salary scale)

A. Ministers and vice-ministers (215 đồng per month).

B. Directors-general (185 đồng per month).

C. Directors and managers (125 đồng per month).

D. Special workers such as miners and divers (80-100 đồng per month).

E. Ordinary workers (30-50 đồng per month).

N. Ordinary citizens.

Table 2.2 Black Market Price Differences by 1980⁴¹

Items	Official Price (State Store)	Black Market Price
Meat	3.5 đồng / kg	25 đồng / kg
Fish	1.0 đồng / kg	15 đồng / kg
Sugar	1.3 đồng / kg	25 đồng / kg
Condensed Milk	1.7 đồng per can	3.5 đồng per can
TV sets	700 đồng each	3,000 to 4,000 đồng

Also available on the black market were foreign currency, precious metals, and jewelry, all necessary items if one was preparing to leave.

Reforms from 1975 to 1978 specifically sought to remove capital and power from the ethnic Chinese of Vietnam. The anti-comprador movement and the removal of private capital and enterprise in March of 1978 pushed those with means into retreat. The

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 102.

removal of classes and capital in a communist system is by no means out of the ordinary. Many of the southern Hoa were prepared for these measures as they had already seen them implemented in the North after 1954. The currency reforms were aimed at the same goal. While the currency reforms were not equal between the north and south, they were aimed at the inflation in the south. The irony was that the inflation had been caused by poor grain production and the very removal of capital which sought to balance the economy. The black market sought to create new equity within the market place. At the same time, international diplomacy collapsed between China and Vietnam. Though the two were once sisters through war, postwar bliss gave way to squabbling over Vietnam's involvement in Kampuchea and the treatment of Hoa in Vietnam. These factors combined made life uncomfortable for the Sino-Vietnamese in Vietnam. Even the forced expulsion in the north was not enough to push the Hoa out. Instead, the Hoa of the south, waited. They waited until there was an official means of exit. They waited until there was more than one way to escape.

CHAPTER THREE

The Means of Escape and the Crucial Case of the *Hai Hong*

For the Boat People who left in the exodus from 1978 to 1980 there were an ever-growing number of small ships exiting Vietnam. Boats had left the country since April of 1975 but these were primarily in small numbers and with small numbers of refugees aboard. This “first wave” was comprised mainly of educated elites in the earliest part of 1975. First wave departures were considered true refugees as they fled over fears of reprisals from communist officials and the military. Those attached directly to the former leader of South Vietnam (Thieu) were quick to attempt their leave. These educated elite could afford the means of escape. Most were tied to the military and therefore controlled the access and means of escape by plane, helicopter, or boat. Stories of flight involved stealing small watercraft and even the appropriation of a C-130 military cargo plane to Thailand.¹ Some fishermen were included in the earliest exodus because they also had a means to get to the American Seventh Fleet stationed in international waters. The “second wave” consisted of fishermen and peasants living in coastal areas or along major rivers. Most of these individuals were poorly educated and helped to establish an early reputation for the negative ways in which the subsequent waves of refugees would be viewed. The “third wave” was that of the ethnic Chinese.

The examples used in this chapter highlight the unique position that every family and every member of the Hoa in southern Vietnam had in their decision to leave. Several

¹ Lockheed C-130A-45-LM Hercules, Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum found online at <http://www.nasm.si.edu/collections/artifact.cfm?id=A19890039000> accessed August 17, 2008. See also Ralph Wetterhahn, “Escape to U Taphao,” *Air and Space Magazine*, January 1, 1997. Seen online at <http://www.airspacemag.com/military-aviation/escape.html?c=y&page=1> accessed October 8, 2009.

methods could be employed to leave the country and the amount of risk involved was assumed by the individual. The boat people who traveled on the *Hai Hong* represented a turning point in how nations defined refugees. In one passionate exchange off the shores of Malaysia, one United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) official made a decision that would impact those leaving Vietnam for the next three years. His decision to classify those leaving Vietnam by boat as refugees, allowed for a protected status to the ethnic Chinese departures from Vietnam.

Escape from the country was not unilaterally performed by all peoples involved. In the examples presented, the ethnicity of those involved was not always recorded. Each exodus story represents a possible means of escape for any individual willing, including the Sino-Vietnamese. There were four ways in which one became a refugee on the open seas: (1) escape (*di chui*), (2) escape with permission (*mua bai*, literally, “purchase of a loading place”), (3) semi-official exit (*di ban chinh tuoc*), and (4) official registration (*di dang ky ching thuc*).² Each will be examined separately.

Escape – (Di Chui)

This method of leaving the country was by far the riskiest. Should an individual or group be discovered at any portion of the escape, arrest and imprisonment were guaranteed. These escapes involved secret planning and secret execution. One example involved the use of fishing as a livelihood. Nguyen Van Phong purchased a fishing boat and fishing license to obtain the means for escape. He sold the fish to the state, and acquired a gas ration which could be slowly saved over time and then used for the escape.

² Nguyen Van Canh, *Vietnam Under Communism, 1975-1982* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Hoover Institution Press, 1983), 129.

Figure 3.1 Refugee Movement Map of Southeast Asia³

³ Bold numbers represent typical departure points for refugees and boat people. Lighter numbers represent the most common locations where their boats landed as well as key refugee camps established by the UNHCR. Nguyen Van Canh, *Vietnam Under Communism*, 133. Original map is from *Người Việt Tự Do*, unknown date.

He left the former South Vietnamese capital after spending three months assembling a drum raft using this method. He lashed eighteen empty oil drums together and a crude deck and cabin constructed above. Leaving in September of 1975, at a pace of roughly six miles per hour, Nguyen and his thirteen relatives were picked up by a Japanese shipping vessel 175 miles off the coast.⁴ Getting rescued at sea was quite fortunate for Nguyen. In the early years (1975 to the first-half of 1978), naval shipping vessels would frequently stop to investigate small boats in the South China Sea. As the refugee crisis expanded and endured into the 1980s, commercial shipping would not stop for SOS signals or, more often, simply redirected their boats to other shipping channels around common refugee areas.

Barry Wain, as the lead investigator/reporter for the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, was given the ultimate freedom in covering the stories of the Indochinese refugees. In his book *The Refused*, he highlights several stories, interviews, and evidence that make him a primary source on the “boat people” phenomenon. This escape (*Di chui*) version of refugees contained a high level of risk. Dao Van Ky was a former naval officer in the South and proceeded to escape with his wife and others on a thirty-foot boat. Dao’s boat was followed by another vessel carrying sixty refugees. After leaving Vung Tau (coastal city thirty miles SSE of Saigon or bold number seven on the *Refugee Movement Map of Southeast Asia* above) in June 1976 he was confronted on the open seas by a larger fishing vessel. After being questioned about his destination, the faux-fisherman produced M-16 assault rifles and removed all the would-be refugees to the larger fishing boat. This

⁴ Quoted from Nguyen Van Phong, “A Prayer for Land,” *Người Việt Tự Do*, in the section on Boat People in Barry Wain, *The Refused: The Agony of the Indochina Refugees* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 44.

had been a communist naval patrol investigating departures. Late at night and under guard, the refugees offered two of the guards some gold for their M-16s. The two agreed to the deal and the former officers/refugees began to fight for their escape. After a skirmish that ended with all of the communists dead, Dao proceeded in the large fishing boat to Songkhla in Thailand (number 21 *Refugee Movement Map of Southeast Asia* above). Ninety-two refugees were rescued (the two bribed guards left with the refugees).⁵ With Vietnamese-Soviet relations (arms agreements and aid) at an all-time high, one also had to be concerned with getting spotted by friendly boats. One boatload of people was returned to Hanoi when picked up on the high-seas by a Russian naval vessel. While communist interception was a risk for those of the *di chui* variety, other perils at sea remained.

In 1977 Tran Hue Hue was a seventeen-year-old girl who fled from the police to make it to a boat in order to leave the country. Her parents and the captain of the boat were left behind in the panic and narrow escape. The boat ran aground near the Philippines on a coral atoll. The fifty surviving refugees attempted to live off of seagulls, crabs, and oysters. Their numbers dwindled, and after five months a fourteen-year-old boy was Tran Hue Hue's only companion in the rusted hull of their boat. He died ten days prior to her rescue by a Filipino fishing trawler.⁶ Regardless of the outcome, individuals who left using the escape (*di chui*) means, left of their own free will. Escape without permission in a clandestine fashion posed the most risk for those attempting to leave.

⁵ Barry Wain, *The Refused: The Agony of the Indochina Refugees*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

Escape with Permission (Mua Bai)

These forms of escape involved purchasing permission at the local level to leave. Bribing the port authority or naval patrol were common means of achieving this type of escape. These payments would range in price, but most were conducted in gold or hard western currency obtained on the black market. Payments often filtered their way up; corruption at the local level allowed this type of escape to thrive.

*Figure 3.2 Cartoon Depicting Refugee Gold Passed Through the Bureaucracy*⁷

The permission to leave was only a local permission and often communication was not sufficient to provide a guaranteed passage. The naval patrols still arrested and detained those trying to escape in a seemingly random order. Once jailed, the refugee could then pay the going rate of six taels in order to leave the prison. This method helped to fleece the refugee who may or may not have paid enough in bribes the first time around. Sixty Vietnamese trying to leave Danang for Hong Kong in 1977 were arrested by a naval patrol after a boat crewman leaked their escape details before leaving. Of

⁷ Nguyen Van Canh, p. 40 original source unknown.

those imprisoned, “It is known that one 30-year-old man remained there for more than two years until his sister, who lived abroad, visited Vietnam and arranged for his release.”⁸ In situations like these, the fleecing of the refugee was the main priority. Hoa of lower economic status preferred escaping Vietnam’s borders through this local permission method. Vietnamese also left the country through this method.

A female lawyer, with her practice privileges revoked after 1975, attempted to leave four times. During the first escape she left from Nha Trang (bold number 4 *Refugee Movement Map of Southeast Asia* above) and managed to get to sea, but the captain turned back fearing that the Philippines were too far away for the craft. In 1976 she correctly balked at an attempt that did not feel right and which ultimately failed. By 1977 her third attempt landed her in jail for eight months. Once jailed, she had to pay the six taels to get out. Her fourth attempt involved a paid exit but she the operation was a scam. She lost all of her money spent on the exit and the escape never materialized.⁹ Her fifth and final attempt was successful, but involved intricacies in planning and execution that rival a Hollywood suspense-thriller plot. Escaping with permission was an alluring means of escape even though it could pose formidable risks. Often the local permission bribe was to pay for an escape that looked like a genuine struggle. Naval patrols would often shoot at escaping boats and if bribed properly, they would shoot to miss.¹⁰ Escaping with local permission provided an opportunity for thousands to leave

⁸ Wain, *The Refused*, 46.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰ *Asia 1980 Yearbook*. (Hongkong: Far Eastern Economic Review, 1980), 109-110.

Vietnam. In choosing their method and where their bribes were placed, Hoa of southern Vietnam controlled how and when they left the country.

Semi-Official Exits (Di Ban Chinh Tuoc)

Semi-Official exits were characterized by government involvement and the transfer of large amounts of capital. Provincial party members would directly supervise the number of refugees, their organization, and the exit. Each refugee would pay approximately twelve taels to the head organizer. The organizer then purchased a boat with provisions that may or may not have been adequate for the voyage. Originally these types of exits utilized medium-sized boats holding under three hundred people. Bribes also took on a wider scope in order to accommodate party officials, who reported to officials throughout the communist committee system (several levels of government). The Ministry of the Interior and Ministry of Finance in Hanoi managed the receipts of refugee exits. Estimates place the sales at \$115 million in 1978 (1978 American dollars equivalent to 378.4 million in 2009) which accounted for 2.5 percent of the total estimated gross national product.¹¹ The ministers abroad would issue departure orders and quotas for specific southern provinces.

While a significant amount of money was generated by taxing the refugees, the real capital transfer came from abandoning estates. In order to achieve permission to leave, a family would have to surrender all its primary possessions to a party official. Houses, cars, televisions not already confiscated, and other luxury goods would be transferred to local party committees with titles, keys, and all official means of ownership being handed or signed over in full. Once organized and loaded, the vessel would

¹¹ Guy Sacerdoti, "How Hanoi Cashes In," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 15, 1979, p. 24.

embark and be towed out to international waters and then pointed in the direction of a common refugee destination.¹² It was through these means that Tam Truong and two nephews had a scheduled boat to leave the country. Their escape, however, was also accomplished through clandestine means.

Tam's friend had already arranged an exit for herself and her relatives. The entirety of the Truong family had yet to finalize their plans to leave. Tam was given a week's notice before her departure date. On the designated day, after leaving the brick factory, Tam was contacted by her friend and told to meet at four in the morning at a family bakery. On the evening of her departure, Tam told her family of her choice to leave. Two nephews were also given the opportunity to join her at the last minute. The nephews were included but were not considered to be definite departures. Shortly after four A.M. Tam, with nephews in tow, joined her friend's family in a car caravan to Ba Ria, a small village across the estuary from Vung Tau. Once at the local bus station, three or four busses organized by the departure team drove the groups to the major port area of Vung Tau. Tam believes the busses were government busses and organized from the local party officials. Her perception is accurate because all public transportation had been nationalized including busses, taxis, and trains in 1975. Once these busses were staged, Tam began to prepare for boarding the boat. Neither Tam nor the nephews had paid the tax to be allowed to board the vessel.

They did not carry any personal belongings or money in order to use on the trip itself. On the chance that the nephews decided to back out, a friend who was driving one of the original cars would return the boys back to their homes. Tam maneuvered herself and the boys for a much bolder escape as other individuals queued for their registered

¹² Nguyen Van Canh, *Vietnam Under Communism*, 129.

semi-official exit. A party cadre was checking roll a good distance from the ramp to the boat. Tam used the surrounding high grass to sneak around the official checkpoint and join the queue on the other side of the official. Tam moved with enough speed onto the boat that she was unaware of the nephews behind her. Once aboard the launch she was surprised to see that they had managed the same maneuver and had joined her in their exit.¹³ Here began the more harrowing aspects of their journey.

Tam's boat was meant to hold roughly one hundred fifty passengers. The boat was instead stuffed with almost three hundred. One woman gave birth on the boat and while normally welcomed on land, a maritime birth signaled misfortune for the superstitious. Their fears were answered a few days later. As the boat rode low in the water the hull of the boat began to crack under the strain. Once water entered, the men of the boat were commissioned to bail. The one onboard restroom was quickly overwhelmed and conditions worsened. Due to the lack of facilities on the boat, the cargo holds had not only begun to fill with water from the hull breach, but they also filled with human waste. Bailing dirty water became a fetid chore that no one enjoyed.

Fifteen days were spent on the boat, with each individual rationed a small amount of fresh water. The amount was equivalent to the cap of a five gallon water bottle. The nephews were in dire thirst and attempted to drink seawater. They each learned quickly that, while overly abundant, the water around them was more threatening than they had imagined. The length of the journey was longer than necessary due to the inexperience of the boat's captain at sea. The boat essentially zigzagged its way to Malaysia. During the voyage two refugees were lost. One was of old age and the other was a sick individual

¹³ Tam Truong, interview by Daniel Hoover, August 6-10, 2008, in Houston, Texas, digital recording, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX, 18-23.

that could not handle the trial at sea.¹⁴ It was not uncommon to lose members of a refugee boat at sea, nor was it uncommon to gain them. These population fluctuations were typically small on smaller boats. A true accounting of the losses and births at sea will never be attainable due to the lack of record-keeping on the voyage as well as the censure of exit records in Vietnam. Tam and company reached the shores of Malaysia and were not allowed to land for a few days by Malaysian officials.

While her journey was by no means over, Tam's journey to Malaysia reflected every available choice. While conditions had been difficult, there was no one who forced her to leave. Her decision, as well as the decision of the nephews, sent her on a boat to the South China Sea. While Tam's friend paid for her and her family's passage, Tam did not pay in order to leave the country. Decisions like these were made daily by Hoa wishing to leave Vietnam. Most fleeing refugees, as the Hoa were incorrectly portrayed, do not have the luxury of deciding when, where, or how much to pay for their departure. Every aspect of Tam's departure included choices. While their arrival was considered unwelcome, their choice to leave could not be ignored. It was through the semi-official means of escape that many Hoa managed their exodus.

Official Registration (Di dang ky ching thuc)

Leaving via official registration was strictly limited to ethnic Chinese and was heavily supervised by the central government. Each family was required to turn in their family scroll or book outlining births, deaths, and relatives. In this manner the

¹⁴ Tam Truong, interview by Daniel Hoover, August 6-10, 2008, in Houston, Texas, digital recording, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX, 15-16.

government could cross check the family's information with that of the state.¹⁵ Each Hoa wishing to leave would pay anywhere from ten to twelve taels of gold. Official registration came to serve as the *modus operandi* for the large steel-hulled refugee ships that could carry thousands of people. These large boats found their way to Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Hong Kong. Most moored within the former city of Saigon or Vung Tao and would be escorted by military vessels to international waters. The remaining examples given will be of this type.

Family groups and individuals leaving via official registration were still subjected to many of the requirements of the previous three methods. Secrecy was necessary to the extent that if employers, suppliers, or vehement parties discovered a plan to leave, actions could be taken against those leaving before they left. The Truongs, having already faced neighborhood reprisals, could have faced a power struggle at the last remaining factory if the employees had discovered their plan to leave. Many of the Truong family were unaware of the details concerning their upcoming escape. Informants were feared within the community as imprisonment could detain a Hoa indefinitely or require more bribing money. Escape with permission was incorporated into the fourth type as the taels of money were to be filtered through cadre channels. The official registration exit incorporated every aspect of confiscation found in the semi-official exit. Titles, keys, and other means of control to all goods of interest, were surrendered to communist officials. Many refugees reported signing away their goods in a note that read, "I am very happy to give all this property to the Vietnamese Government. This government is very good to

¹⁵ Paul Wilson, "How Vietnam Profits from Human Traffic," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 12, 1979, 10.

give us the opportunity to see our families again.”¹⁶ In order to circumvent the required surrender of personal goods, family properties were often disseminated to relatives, family friends, and former business partners. The Truong family gave away a large portion of its heirloom furniture and properties in this manner before they left.¹⁷ Thus, an element of control was still exercised when surrendering all of one’s worldly possessions for officially registered exits.

While the personification of victims for those that left the country is not to be diminished, many parties sought to gain from the officially registered exits of ethnic Chinese. Hanoi understood that with over 1,200 miles of coastline, keeping a population within the border would be difficult. With an ongoing incursion into Kampuchea and relations with China approaching an overture to war, Vietnam decided not to limit those wishing to exit. Instead, they would profit from them. Of the many motivations for Hanoi to relax its restrictive strategy of population control, the most relevant were: the collection of gold, seizure of property, and the repatriation of refugees’ earnings.¹⁸ Many of these were directly reflected in the exodus of the Hoa from Vietnam.

The collection of gold by the government was the primary motivating factor to allowing official exits. Hanoi owed a great deal to the Soviet Union, and much of its earnings from departures were sent there. Many Western journalists reported seeing thin

¹⁶ Fox Butterfield, “Hanoi Regime Reported Resolved to Oust Nearly All Ethnic Chinese,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1979, A6.

¹⁷ Minh Truong, Nguyet Truong, Chin Truong, and Tam Truong, interview by Daniel Hoover, August 6-10, 2008, in Houston, Texas, digital recording, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

¹⁸ Nguyen Van Canh, *Vietnam Under Communism*, 130-132.

gold bars with the Vietnamese Kim Thanh logo in Eastern European countries.¹⁹ Soviet aid was estimated at anywhere from one to two million dollars per day in 1978.²⁰ This aid was estimated at \$700 million to one billion for economic aid, and up to \$800 million for military aid in 1978 alone. Aid in 1978 increased to 1.8 billion and peaked in 1985, growing to 3.3 billion in 1985.²¹ The seizure of personal property was also important to Hanoi. Many northern officials, who relocated to the south, felt they should be rewarded for their work, relocation, and resistance to corruption. The answer was to take the confiscation of personal property through the reforms in 1975 and again in March of 1978 and give it to senior communist officials. Any additional property taken through officially registered exits only added to the coffers.

Once refugees were established on foreign shores, they then could send money and goods back to Vietnam to support relatives and friends left behind. In an identical move to the Chinese, Vietnam established under the communist party an Office for Vietnamese Overseas in former Saigon. By 1982 the office was receiving an estimated 220 tons of goods every month as gifts for family members still in Vietnam.²² Based on these methods, Hanoi was able to capitalize on a citizen base it no longer desired. The money sent to Vietnam was always exchanged at favorable rates for the government and not the Vietnamese. Many inspection officials would pilfer through packages and were known to steam open envelopes in order to extract cash. One report included the use of

¹⁹ Fox Butterfield, "Hanoi Regime Reported Resolved to Oust Nearly All Ethnic Chinese," A1.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Douglas Pike, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union: Anatomy of an Alliance*, (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1987), p 139.

²² Nguyen Van Canh, *Vietnam Under Communism*, 132.

an abandoned U.S. x-ray machine in order to examine packages for cash and other desired goods.²³ Hanoi profited directly from officially registered departures and then profited again through their proceeds returned home. Each of the four methods incorporated a choice given to the would-be refugee. Escape provided the most applicable actions to being an actual refugee. The other three methods involved a degree of personal control from conception to execution. The refugee payout was to be huge and these profits were not going to be expressly limited to communist cadre members.

The Greed of Tay Kheng Hong

Tay Kheng Hong was fifty-one years old in 1978 and had an extensive network of connections throughout Southeast Asia. He had most recently returned to a business set up in Singapore and was working on brokering the purchase and sale of an outdated cargo vessel. Tay had been organizing shipping for a long time; as an ethnic Chinese, he had originally set up a shipping company in South Vietnam in 1971. The name of the company, Vietnam Timber Manufacture Export, was later changed to Vitimex. The *Hai Hong* was Tay's first full scale investment in shipping since the fall of Saigon under the Vitimex name. The purchase and organizing of the voyage for the *Hai Hong* was a complicated venture; he had deliberately hidden the process as a way to hide the *Hai Hong's* true purpose, human trafficking. Tay had organized another boating excursion once before with a boat called the *Southern Cross*. This vessel had carried 1,250 refugees from Vietnam and had earned Tay the notable sum of at least \$500,000.²⁴ Tay

²³ Wain, *The Refused*, 96.

²⁴ Wain, *The Refused*, 17.

had used his Overseas Chinese contacts in Vietnam and abroad to manage his own escape from Vietnam as well as that of 1,250 paying customers.

The voyage of the *Southern Cross* was one of the first organized refugee movements involving a non-Vietnamese vessel. The term *refugee* is used here because the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) used the designation to refer to individuals that had been rescued from the *Southern Cross*. The boat had generated a small amount of press coverage as well as an investigation by the UNHCR. By the time of the *Hai Hong*'s departure, little had been learned, but the details are important. According to Barry Wain, investigative reporter for the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, the *Southern Cross* had been, "Arranged by Tay using Overseas-Chinese [sic] contacts within Vietnam and outside, the *Southern Cross* affair also involved Chong Chai Kok, aged 30, managing director of Seng Bee Shipping, and Sven Olof Ahlqvist, a Finnish sea captain who carried a Singaporean employment pass."²⁵ Chong Chai Kok, himself an ethnic Chinese, helped to ferry out Hoa from Vietnam.

Though Chong's motivation was strictly profit, Tay also had other ulterior motives for his human trafficking. While a resident of Singapore, during his ventures in Vietnam, Tay took a second wife in Saigon (his first remained in Singapore).²⁶ With this second wife he had two children. Tay and these three had been trapped in Saigon since the collapse in 1975. Tay managed to bribe his way out alone in April of 1978. Barry Wain recalls, "Just four months after boarding an Air France flight out of Vietnam he had headed back by sea, anxious to be reunited with his second wife and to recover \$110,000

²⁵ Wain, *The Refused*, 18.

²⁶ Nghia M. Vo, *The Vietnamese Boat People, 1954 and 1975-1992*, (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2006), 91.

in cash he had entrusted to her.”²⁷ Chong and Ahlqvist hired Allan Ross (a thirty-six year old Singaporean businessmen/seafarer) to oversee their financial interests on the trip.

On August 24, 1978 the *Southern Cross* set sail for what was supposed to be a salt commodity pickup in Bangkok. Instead, the freighter went to Vietnam, where it made pre-arranged contact with a fishing vessel. Once identified by a coded message on the side of the hull, the *Southern Cross* was allowed entrance to the port in the mouth of the Saigon River. Wain notes,

...the *Southern Cross* had received red-carpet treatment when it went to collect its cargo. A Vietnamese government pilot launch came alongside; the pilot boarded the *Southern Cross* and guided it up the twisting Saigon River to a berth in Ho Chi Minh City. The ship was supplied with fresh water and vegetables, guarded by troops patrolling the wharf and guided by the same pilot to the collection point the following day.²⁸

Tay had also been escorted to a dinner with civilian officials and, upon departure, the boat was allowed to fly the Vietnamese red and yellow flag. All of the paying passengers were picked up and Tay’s wife and kids were liberated, along with \$110,000 in personal cash and four sacks of gold representing the fares. The *Southern Cross* made for the South China Sea and radioed for help once in international waters. The boat sent a radio message falsely claiming that hundreds of refugees had swarmed aboard in international waters from four large fishing junks.²⁹ The boat then set sail for Malaysia.

Dealing with business on the boat was the first matter of importance. Ahlqvist took a large yacht from Singapore to meet the *Southern Cross* in order to collect both Tay and Ross (overseer) as well as the gold. The boat attempted to land at Mersing, near the

²⁷ Wain, *The Refused*, p 18.

²⁸ Wain, *The Refused*, p 21. See also *Asia 1980 Yearbook*. (Hongkong: Far Eastern Economic Review, 1980), 112

²⁹ Wain, *The Refused*, p 16-18.

Tengah Island refugee camp in the southern State of Johore (number 25 *Refugee Movement Map of Southeast Asia* above). Malaysian naval officials would not allow the boat to dock. Within a few hundred yards of the shore, medical evacuations were made. Once completed, the Malay Navy quickly escorted the boat back out to international waters. Nearby Singapore would not accept the boat and its new cargo either. Due to a concern about supplies, Chong sent fuel, water, and a few days of food from Seng Bee Shipping for the 1,250 individuals on board. The August heat was blistering in the open seas of the tropics. Ross and Ahlqvist made a hasty return to the *Southern Cross* and steered for Indonesian waters. Here they beached the boat deliberately on Pengibu Island (north of number 18 *Refugee Movement Map of Southeast Asia* above).³⁰ Immediately the crew radioed that the boat was a total loss. The Vietnamese and Hoa scrambled ashore and set up camps, happy to be on dry land.

Indonesian inspectors quickly suspected the boat had been scuttled to offload the unwanted as well as to file an insurance claim on the boat. Tay and the parties involved could have cared less about the insurance on the boat. The money trail speaks volumes concerning the motivation for large vessels to transport ethnic Chinese from Vietnam. There were 560 children on board and 690 adults. While each had paid to get on board, most of that money had gone to the communists back in Vietnam. The communist officials paid the boat organizers for each passenger. Each child had paid one tael and each adult two taels. This grossed the organizers 1,940 taels for all the individuals they carried. Each tael had traditionally been worth \$250 dollars. Due to the fluctuating market value of gold, the tael had roughly doubled by 1979, nearing \$500. Grossing

³⁰ Southwest of the Anambas Islands

close to \$900,000, the voyage was quite profitable.³¹ Even after paying Ahlqvist and Chong over \$184,000, Ross \$8,300, and the original boat purchase; Tay made well over \$500,000. The income did not stop there.

While Indonesia did not wish to settle, accept, or even feed those aboard, the UNHCR pressed the country to accept them. Seng Bee Shipping sent a trawler with relief supplies for the Vietnamese stranded on the island at the request and expense of the UNHCR. Seng Bee actually charged the UNHCR to resupply the refugees it had shipwrecked on Pengibu. Indonesia managed to move the refugees to Bintan Island south of Singapore, where they were placed in a U.N. refugee camp.³² Tay's wife was forced to join the refugees, albeit relieved of her \$110,000 in carrying cash. The depiction of the *Southern Cross* was strictly viewed as a sympathetic plight of expelled refugees from Vietnam. Official positions across ASEAN nations were quickly hardening as the evidence of these "rescues at sea" started to seem less believable.

On October 15, 1978 a boat named the *Hai Hong* left Singapore for Hong Kong. Her captain was Susun Serigar along with fifteen other Indonesians as her crew. Also aboard were two passengers named Lee Sam and Lee Kian Yap. The 1,586-ton vessel had been purchased on 2 October for \$125,000.³³ The newest owner was to be Rosewell Maritime Co., a small Hong Kong trading company. Rosewell had purchased the vessel using Hong Kong-based Seng Bee Shipping (Pte.)³⁴ through the Singapore-based

³¹ The value of the tael is based on a weight equal to 1.21 troy ounces and therefore 37.79 grams, Value based on gold prices averaged from January 1975 to December 1978, compiled from the economics section of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 1975-1978.

³² Wain, *The Refused*, p 20.

³³ All financial data will be given in U.S. 1978-79 dollars.

³⁴ Pte. Stands for Public Trading Enterprise and is similar to a Ltd. or Inc. in the U.S.

Vitimex Import & Export. These brokerages purchased the vessel via proxy from Guan Guan Shipping which had previously called the boat the *Golden Hill*. After this complicated financial maze was completed, Tay Kheng Hong purchased a registration certificate for the *Hai Hong* through the Panamanian consulate-general. The Panamanian consulate-general would often sell registration rights for one month certificates for \$4,600.³⁵ The *Hai Hong* received its permit on 9 October; one month would be sufficient, as the vessel was scheduled to be scrapped on arrival in Hong Kong.

Quick to turn a profit, Tay negotiated the purchase of the *Hai Hong* as mentioned above. Ten days after the purchase of Panamanian registration, the *Hai Hong* was anchored forty miles south of Vung Tau. Son Ta Tang, another ethnic Chinese within the Cholon district, had managed organization on the Vietnamese side for the *Southern Cross* and would do the same for the *Hai Hong*. Son Ta Tang had cabled that 1,000 passengers could be extracted. By the time the boat arrived, the number was slightly larger at 1,200. Upon arrival, however, the communist officials insisted that 2,500 passengers be loaded and that the extra 1,300 be allowed free passage. The government had, of course, collected money from the Hoa, but it was not willing to pass it along to Tay and his organizers. If this was not agreed upon, then neither Son Ta Tang nor the boat would be allowed to leave port.³⁶ In this instance, the Hoa leaving the country were used as collateral and leverage against those profiting from their departure.

On a boat measuring 246 feet in length by 34 feet wide, officials crammed almost 2,450 people. The boat was supposed to leave on 22 October but could not leave until 24

³⁵ Wain, *The Refused*, 16.

³⁶ Wain, *The Refused*, p 21.

October due to extra loading time. Roughly half of those on board were under eighteen. Tay was paid 1.5 taels per registered individual up to the original 1,200; the additional travelers were not paid for. The boat left and headed for the original destination of Hong Kong. Due to the encroaching Typhoon Rita, Susun Serigar (captain) had to stop for shelter near the Paracel Islands.³⁷ As the seas swelled, Serigar fled to more familiar waters near Indonesia. Other than a radio signal to notify Tay (in Singapore) of the course change, the boat was silent. Once near an Indonesian port, Serigar docked the boat in rough seas and damaged the dock.³⁸ Tay was immediately phoned in order to pay for the damages. Tay flew to Indonesia, chartered a boat, visited his wife still on Bintan Island, and negotiated a repair bill of \$12,500. In doing so, he also collected the gold from the voyage but kept it on his person and on the boat. Tay also radioed George Poay, a Seng Bee employee, to coordinate the pickup of the travel fares. In an oddity not understood, Captain Serigar left the harbor and, as soon as he reached international waters, he radioed not the Indonesian or Malaysian authorities, but instead the UNHCR directly at the Eastern South Asia regional office in Kuala Lumpur.³⁹ This message was sent on November 2, 1978.

In sending his message directly to the UNHCR, Serigar relayed curious details of the voyage of the *Hai Hong*. Serigar claimed that the boat had engine trouble *en route* from Singapore to Hong Kong on 23 Oct. He reported that on the following day the boat was boarded by some two-thousand refugees. This original story posed some interesting questions. If boarded on 24 October, why had the vessel waited a week to report the

³⁷ This was disputed territory between China and Vietnam mentioned earlier

³⁸ Tarempa on Siantan Island in the Anambas, about 200-250 miles NE of Singapore

³⁹ Wain, *The Refused*, 21-23.

refugees? How did two-thousand refugees coordinate, in separate boats, to be 225 miles east of Vietnam during Typhoon Rita and converge on the same locale at the same time?

When faced with these questions, Serigar told different versions of the story. To Indonesian Naval intelligence he reported that on 21 October he was boarded and that the refugees had forced him south toward Darwin, Australia. A normal trip from Singapore to Hong Kong would take about eight days. Why had the *Hai Hong* only reached the halfway point in seven days after leaving Singapore? Unconvinced, Indonesia declared that foreign vessels could not stay in their waters without sufficient reason. This resulted in the forced return of the passengers of the *Hai Hong* to sea.

As the investigation pressed further, British authorities revealed the original destination was Hong Kong. With Darwin as the secondary target, Western authorities were concerned about the change in direction for refugees. Typically, refugees had headed south and west toward Thailand. Additionally, Rosewell Maritime owner T. C. Wei (an ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong) acknowledged his intent to purchase the *Golden Hill*, the original name of the *Hai Hong*. This acknowledgement raised the question about why so much was spent on the boat. Tay had spent \$125,000 with the reported intention of scrapping the vessel. Authorities knew that the scrapping would not earn Rosewell or any vested party anywhere near that amount. It was here that the investigation of the *Southern Cross* started to interfere with *Hai Hong* operations.

Interviews of the refugees uncovered little, as they had been coached to say that they were found at sea in small boats. This helped them obtain the eagerly sought refugee status. Interrogations of the crew of the *Southern Cross* revealed a different story, as well as the vessel owner's plans true plans. Barry Wain recalls, "Most galling of

all to the Indonesians (the crew), Captain Ahlqvist ... had been heard to remark that one more trip like that of the Southern Cross would complete his plans to retire to the Philippines.”⁴⁰ Officials everywhere in Southeast Asia were now on alert. The Indonesians were especially wary of any ethnic Chinese entering their homeland. Indonesia perceived the Chinese and ethnic Chinese as the organizers behind an unsuccessful coup attempt in Jakarta in 1965. Senior military officials in Indonesia believed that those acting in the coup utilized direct support and backing from Beijing (Peking). The result of those actions led to the killing of thousands of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia throughout 1965 and 1966.⁴¹ The boat was supplied, but still unwanted. Thus, the *Hai Hong* was escorted out to international waters with Tay still on board. On its way to Malaysia, the *Hai Hong* was met by a tugboat with George Poay (radioed earlier) on board. The Seng Bee employee picked up nearly one thousand taels; Tay kept his two hundred taels onboard.

Surrounding countries became concerned about the true status of these passengers onboard the *Hai Hong*. Were they really refugees? Most responded with a resounding no. Some news agencies reported that those on board the *Hai Hong* had paid up to \$5 million for their passage.⁴² As the second reported destination, Australia was particularly concerned with the implications of refugee status. The arrival of earlier boats, "...had triggered an odd coalition of leftist trade unionists, political conservatives and plain, old-fashioned racists demanding an end to the admission of Vietnamese refugees, whom they

⁴⁰ Wain, *The Refused*, p 25.

⁴¹ Donald Kirk, "Indonesia's Chinese Are a People Without a Country," *New York Times*, October 23, 1966, p SM17.

⁴² "2,500 Vietnamese Seek Aid in Appeal From Ship," *New York Times*, November 11, 1978, p 28.

variously branded as former Saigon bar owners, drug pushers, brothel keepers and prostitutes.”⁴³ Australia wanted those on the *Hai Hong* labeled as illegal immigrants. Stopping this ship would send a message to future organizers that these types of arrivals would not be permitted. The simple discussion of labeling these individuals as immigrants instead of refugees placed their fate and their decision to leave in their own hands.

The UNHCR was originally not sure how to label those on the *Hai Hong* either. Regional representative Rajagopalam Sampatkumar discussed with the office in Geneva the possibility of labeling those aboard as illegal immigrants. While unresolved and undecided, Sampatkumar issued a report that claimed the UNHCR did not know the current position of the boat but that several factors, “...lead one to question the motive of the owners, agent and the captain of the ship concerned.”⁴⁴ He also warned that, “...unscrupulous elements could ruin the hopes of and resettlement of genuine refugees.”⁴⁵ The *Hai Hong* was in international waters with little hope of docking anywhere. On 9 November, the day the Panamanian registration expired, the *Hai Hong* attempted to pull into Port Klang (Kuala Lumpur) in Malaysia. The boat attempted to dock under the previously named *Golden Hill* which had been registered in Malaysia originally. The refugees held on to whatever they could as the captain attempted to maneuver his way around coastal vessels but the efforts gained little. The boat, regardless of name, was quickly blockaded within the harbor and denied entrance.

⁴³ Wain, *The Refused*, p 26.

⁴⁴ Wain, *The Refused*, p 27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Wain 27.

The status of those on board was precarious at best. How were these individuals to be labeled, as refugees or illegal immigrants? UNHCR representative Sampatkumar had originally agreed with the Australians, and even the Americans. The United States had declared it did not want any of these refugees either. While the U.S. urged Malaysia to accept those on board, U.S. policy would handle the 2,500 of the *Hai Hong* only after thousands of others had been processed in their turn.⁴⁶ Despite official questioning, the press always referred to the passengers of the *Hai Hong* as refugees. The Vietnamese themselves remained silent in order to not say anything that may bar the group from entering Malaysia under refugee status.⁴⁷ While officially they were under question, it was far easier for journalists to label them in the same manner they had labeled all those who had left Vietnam since 1975. Most used the story that captain Serigar had originally given, which suggested that the refugees had clambered aboard the boat from smaller craft.

While blockaded, Captain Serigar made a multitude of calls to Reuters and Sampatkumar. Sampatkumar flew to Port Klang to determine if the UNHCR should get involved. On a small boat he traveled to the surrounded *Hai Hong*. He was not allowed to board, but two reporters were. They reported terrible conditions aboard - little food or water and total squalor below decks.⁴⁸ Sampatkumar was not allowed on board in fear that the passengers would take him hostage to obtain entrance to a refugee camp. It was decided immediately that supply was of the utmost concern and that Sampatkumar would

⁴⁶ Henry Kamm, "U.S. Will Accept Refugees but Not From Freighter," *New York Times*, November 18, 1978, p 3.

⁴⁷ Henry Kamm, "2,500 Vietnamese on Ship Decline Malaysian Help and an Ultimatum," *New York Times*, November 17, 1978, A1 and A12.

⁴⁸ Henry Kamm, "Malaysians Bar Huge Boatload of Ill Refugees," *New York Times*, November 12, 1978, p 1.

return the next day in order to bring food, water, and medical aid. Malaysia had plans of its own.

A number of refugees had already entered Malaysia in November of 1978. By 9 November, nearly eight-thousand had arrived on Malaysian shores. This was a marked increase from the previous month, which had seen ten-thousand refugees reach the shores for the entire month. It was reported that many were dying on the *Hai Hong* and that newborns could not receive milk from dehydrated mothers.

Malaysia had attempted to supply the boat but was refused by the refused in fear that acceptance would allow continued marooning at sea. When Sampatkumar attempted to return with supplies, Malaysian naval officials denied the supply efforts. The Malaysians were readying to tow the *Hai Hong* out to international waters. Malaysia had not actually signed the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees nor the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.⁴⁹ None of the ASEAN nations had either.

An especially important component of the 1967 agreement was Article One. The article provided for the *nonrefoulement* of refugees, which claimed that, “no signatory nation shall expel or return refugees against their will to a territory where they fear persecution.”⁵⁰ Of course the passengers on the *Hai Hong* did not want to be returned, but they were still not classified as refugees. On the day Sampatkumar was denied the ability to supply the ship, in a moment of passion, he declared to a nearby reporter that

⁴⁹ UN High Commissioner for Refugees, *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees*, January 1992, pp 57-59...available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b3314.html> [accessed February 17, 2009] Another refugee country, the Philippines, while a signatory, had not ratified these documents until 1981.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

the UNHCR would consider all those aboard the *Hai Hong* as refugees. His pronouncement changed the scope of resettlement for all those who would leave Vietnam in the coming years.

Sampatkumar's statement and acceptance of all those departed as refugees cast an umbrella over everyone leaving Vietnam, no matter their means of escape. The very broad definition of refugee (cited in a chapter one) was used to its fullest extent by Sampatkumar. Now it did not matter how countries of first-asylum (as nations like Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and others had come to be called) treated those reaching their shores. The arrivals would all be considered refugees. The practical consequences of being a refugee meant that the international community would be used to feed, house, transport, and organize their departure out of the countries of first-asylum. While the needs of those reaching foreign shores should be guaranteed, the refugee label carried with it weight that heavily favored those that gained its status. The status of refugee incorporated them into the current refugee regime⁵¹ and helped to further the stigma of those leaving Vietnam as unwanted settlers abroad. Had the boat people been labeled as illegal immigrants, their fate would have been starkly different.

Regardless of their circumstances of departure, everyone was now a refugee. Sampatkumar was portrayed as rash and emotional within ASEAN nations. Indonesia in particular was concerned with the role of the UNHCR in the region. Captain Serigar had, of course, radioed the UNHCR (as had the *Southern Cross*) before it notified Indonesian or Malaysian officials of its plight. These communications furthered concerns within ASEAN nations. Barry Wain states that many nations, "...suspected that the UNHCR

⁵¹ Definition in chapter one.

had a special radio link to certain refugee ships.”⁵² Of course they did not, but Sampatkumar had sent a green light to all other organizers of paying refugees. If there was gold to be made by moving unhappy people, especially wealthy ethnic Chinese from Vietnam, ethnic Chinese profiteers would come out of the woodwork.

Those on the *Hai Hong* were allowed entrance into a refugee camp, and many of the organizers still on board were resettled as refugees in other countries like West Germany and Canada. The organizers, the Hoa, and the passengers on board the *Hai Hong* all managed resettlement by using the process of becoming a refugee. They controlled their fate even in the worst of times on the boat. They had repeatedly refused supplies from Malaysia in fear that they would be towed out to sea. Their defiance kept them in control even while the international community was prepared to condemn them. The UNHCR’s emotional capitulation would serve as the basis for naming all those leaving Vietnam as refugees. The press had already accepted the practice, but the UNHCR made it official, as well as pressuring nations of first-asylum to accept these people.

No matter the method employed by the individual, a clear choice was made by each through his or her attempts to leave Vietnam. Refugee camps were established in many nations and the burdens placed there were difficult. Life in a refugee camp would present many limitations to the exercises of freedom so readily displayed by the ethnic Chinese. In striving to reach this point of resettlement, every Hoa faced new decisions in their country of first-asylum.

⁵² Wain, *The Refused*, p 33.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Truongs Escape and the International Reception

Suddenly roused at one in the morning on April 24, 1979, Chin Truong and her family found themselves at the mercy of yet another search by the Communist officials in Bien Hoa, Vietnam. They had been harassed for four years with threats of New Economic Zones and resettlement. While uncomfortable, there was an option to stay; but the Truongs had already decided that this would be the last visit by officials. What money they had prepared for the trip was buried in the yard, not in the garden, but further back toward a fence line; where the trash, chicken bones and sundries were left to rot and where the officials would not dig for it. The wealth would not remain there for long. Once the officials left, the Truong family made preparations to leave their home, their city, and their country.

Sixteen family members gathered what little they could carry, what supplies they had purchased, and boarded a late-night bus for the beach roughly thirty miles away. The family had arranged their escape and passage with two small ships that led to a large craft to take them to Hong Kong. The message was clear: you could stay, but it would be rough. You could leave, but the trip would not be free, nor guaranteed.

The transition at the beach was seamless until one officer checked the manifest for those who had paid their way. Under the Truong family name there were only fifteen individuals listed, yet sixteen had shown up to leave. The sixteenth member had been born only a month prior and the family had yet to pay for the infant to embark. A gold ring was quickly offered in payment, and the group was allowed to board. They stepped

onto a small boat built for ten, but filled with twenty, huddled under the roof where the banana harvests usually hang. As the small outboard motor fired, the air filled with the dense smoke of poor diesel combustion. The decline in oil quality was the consequence of foreign oil interests pushed out of the area four years prior. The mother held her infant close to her scarf, shielding her from the wind and mist; her life was about to be taken away from home and around the globe.¹

Ethnic Chinese left Vietnam throughout 1979 just as they had in 1978. Those who made it to relocation camps faced new challenges and new choices. Like many others, the Truong family left in bulk in April of 1979 and reached Hong Kong, the preferred destination for Hoa in the north and south. The international reaction to those arriving became increasingly different from a humanitarian mission aimed at refugees. Instead, Southeast Asian nations actively sought to discourage their location as a country of first-asylum. These reactions were more in line with a response to illegal immigration rather than true refugee relief. Despite the continued departures and threats to independence, the Vietnamese Hoa continued to exercise control over their fate until resettlement.

The final months of 1978 saw heightened tensions in Vietnam and also more departures. In 1977 the UNHCR recorded a total of 15,609 people labeled as Indochinese refugees in Southeast Asia. November 1978 alone had 23,606 people registered under the commission for refugees.² Large freighters like the *Hai Hong* arrived in ports over

¹ Minh Truong, Nguyet Truong, Chin Truong, and Tam Truong, interview by Daniel Hoover, August 6-10, 2008, in Houston, Texas, digital recording, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

² *Asia 1980 Yearbook*. (Hongkong: Far Eastern Economic Review, 1980), 111.

Southeast Asia, with Hong Kong by far the most popular attempted destination. On 23 December the *Huey Fong* attempted to dock with 3,318 people on board. The day after Christmas the *Tung An* stopped in Manila in the Philippines with 2,300. The vessel *Skyluck* was more like a cruise liner. Originally the boat dropped off six hundred people in Palawan (Philippines) and then returned to Hong Kong in February of 1979 with 2,651 persons aboard.³ Small vessels also inundated ASEAN nations. Most scuttled their ships and swam ashore. Barry Wain commented on the frequency of those swimming to shore when he said, “At the Pantai Motel in Kuala Trengganu [Malaysia], foreign correspondents sipped drinks at the bar and, staring out the window, watched refugees drown.”⁴ Those washing ashore were not welcome, and in some cases the Malaysian locals would protest or injure those who aided boat people struggling toward the beach.⁵ The boat people themselves ignored the dangers of the sea throughout the region. Originally, the tsunami season, which started in December, was avoided. In 1978 and 1979, however, departures from Vietnam increased during these tsunami-prone months. Those boarding departure vessels were coached as to the questions that could be asked and how to respond in order to appear more refugee-like.⁶ Western officials knew by 1979 the exact methodology of the “refugee racket” as trials against Tay Kheng Hong (*Southern Cross and Hai Hong*) and those concerning the *Huey Fong* clearly outlined the

³ Mary Lee and Paul Wilson, “A New Shipload of Problems,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, (February 16, 1979), 33-34. Barry Wain claims the number to be 21,505, *The Refused*, 69. It is important to note that refugee numbers were constantly being recalculated and there were typically discrepancies between the countries of first-asylum, the UNHCR, and the Red Cross.

⁴ Barry Wain, *The Refused*, 69.

⁵ Malaysians would often throw rocks at junkloads of landing refugees. Donald Wise, “Refugees, Blackmail and a Remedy,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January, 5 1979, 7.

⁶ Wain, *The Refused*, 99-103.

role Vietnam and others played in presenting departing Hoa as refugees.⁷ The government of Vietnam, however, did not always keep the door open for exiting ethnic Chinese.

Outside pressure from other countries and the mounting tensions with China slowed the Hoa exodus from Vietnam. January and February of 1979 each saw less than ten thousand refugees leave to reach foreign shores. This was a considerable decline from an average of seventeen thousand per month from October to December.⁸ This decline was only for January and February, the typhoon season as a whole saw a marked increase in departures. The cause was a traveling high-ranking official, Premier Pham Van Dong, who had toured ASEAN nations in September and October of 1978.

Diplomatic pressure was placed on Pham Van Dong to slow or stop the exits from Vietnam. The slowdown was not implemented, however, until there was a summit in Geneva in December 1978. The purpose of the summit was to work on the Indochinese Refugee Problem. Suggested by France and accepted by Vietnam, United Nations Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim announced that the Vietnamese government would, "...make every effort to stop the illegal departures ... for a reasonable period of time."⁹

While the exits slowed for January and February, Vietnam did not consider those departing as illegal departures. March 1979 saw a renewed effort for ethnic Chinese

⁷ Attorney General of Hong Kong (The Queen) v. Lo Wing, Lo Kwok-wah, Cheng Yat-ying, et al. CACC000747/1979 Court of Appeal, 1979 No. 747, date of judgement May 3, 1980. This was the appeal case of those aboard the Huey Fong who were convicted in 1979. See also *Asia Yearbook*, 1980, 112.

⁸ *Asia 1980 Yearbook*, 111.

⁹ Barry Stein, "The Geneva Conferences and the Indochinese Refugee Crisis," *International Migration Review* Vol. 13, No. 4 (Winter, 1979), 721.

departures from Vietnam. The international community prepared itself for the coming exodus.

Vietnam, in organizing the departures through the Public Security Bureau (PSB), made money as well as officially sanctioned the departures. From a Hoa perspective there was nothing illegal about the process. Furthermore, while ASEAN countries considered labeling the exits as illegal immigrants, no nations actively labeled those leaving Indochina as anything but refugees. Sixty-eight governments attended the December Geneva convention, and only five nations addressed the willingness of the Vietnamese to export their unwanted population. Not a single delegation referred to the payment tolls exacted from departing Hoa. The closest indication that Vietnam was to blame was a surreptitious statement by British Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington. He questioned,

I am bound to wonder what lies behind the exodus and why tens of thousands of men, women and children have died ... because they could not ... continue living in their own country. One can only conclude that they have left because the policies of the Vietnamese Government made it impossible for them to remain.¹⁰

But remain they did. In 1979 there were a variety of estimates of how many Hoa were wishing to leave Vietnam. Outside sources estimated those wishing to leave ranged from 700,000 to three million.¹¹ Vietnam reported 1.2 million Hoa in the south and 200,000 in the north to were preparing to leave.¹² These numbers were often inflated by Hanoi as a diplomatic tool against other nations, a true indicator that Hanoi held its hand on the

¹⁰ *Asia 1980 Yearbook*, 111.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Fox Butterfield, "Hanoi Regime Reported Resolved to Oust Nearly All Ethnic Chinese," *New York Times*, June 12, 1979, A1.

tap.¹³ Lord Carrington's statement only served to further the labeling of those leaving Vietnam as refugees. Having questioned Hanoi's policies, Carrington ensured that the label of refugee was applied to all of the peoples leaving Indochina.

There were not any official consequences attached to the plight of a refugee. Had the ethnic Chinese and others been labeled illegal immigrants, then there could be official recourse to imprison, extradite, or refuse persons attempting to enter a country illegally. It is important to note that not all the boat people leaving Vietnam were ethnic Chinese. The ethnic Chinese were the majority of departures (estimated at 80-85 percent) but ethnic Vietnamese also joined the exodus. Ethnic Vietnamese were known to bribe officials for false Chinese papers in order to exit Vietnam under the official anti-Chinese policy. Many even learned a few key words in Chinese in order to get by official questioning. Several racketeers were arrested and jailed, and Vietnam published the stories so as not to seem complacent about the exiting masses.¹⁴ Thus, the Hoa and Vietnamese left, via boat, to nations willing to call them refugees.

Diplomatic relations continued to deteriorate between China and Vietnam. The battle for influence within Indochina began to boil over by January and February of 1979. By 30 January, both countries had amassed troops along the shared border.¹⁵ Deng Xiaoping restated stern warnings to Vietnam should its policies continue in Kampuchea,

¹³ K. Das, "Refugees: Rocking Asean's Boat," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 15, 1979, 21-23.

¹⁴ *Asia Yearbook, 1980*, 113.

¹⁵ Terrance Smith, "Hanoi Masses Troops On Northern Frontier In Response to China," *New York Times* (January 30, 1979), p A6.

with Overseas-Chinese, and along the land border.¹⁶ China decided to teach Vietnam a lesson and invaded Vietnam along the entire land border on February 17, 1979.¹⁷ The assault was limited in scope and from the outset had little intention of permanence in acquiring territory for China. All infrastructure was destroyed in an offensive that reached to the town of Lan Son. Lan Son had been a traditional stopping point for both Chinese invasions and Vietnamese revolts for autonomy.¹⁸ The advance never reached further than twenty-five miles into Vietnamese territory and by 5 March, most of the fighting was completed. Chinese troops withdrew by the middle of March 1979.

The brief border war should have served as a renewed reason to leave Vietnam for the Hoa of the south. It was reported as a major motivating factor for those wishing to leave.¹⁹ Instead of flocking to the docks, those waiting to leave used the time to prepare for the upcoming voyage. Knowledge of the war by the ethnic Chinese in the south is often inconclusive. Each interviewed member of the Truong family claimed no knowledge of the month-long war between China and Vietnam.²⁰ It is not clear whether Vietnamese authorities censored news coverage of the war in the south in order to

¹⁶ Hedrick Smith, "In Teng Visit, A Natural Hit," *New York Times* (February 1, 1979), p A1. See also Fox Butterfield, "Teng Again Says Chinese May Move Against Vietnam," *New York Times* (February 1, 1979), p A16. And also Edward Friedman, "FOREIGN AFFAIRS The Risk China Faces," *New York Times* (February 4, 1979), p E19.

¹⁷ A common phrase uttered by Deng Xiaoping and other ranking politburo members. They also called it "punishment" for Vietnam's policies and insults.

¹⁸ Pao-min Chang, *The Sino-Vietnamese Territorial Dispute*, The Washington papers, 118. (New York: Praeger, 1986), p 50-54.

¹⁹ Mary Lee, "Welcome to the Free World – If You Can Find It," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 30, 1979, 18-19.

²⁰ Minh Truong, Nguyet Truong, Chin Truong, and Tam Truong, interview by Daniel Hoover, August 6-10, 2008, in Houston, Texas, digital recording, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

maintain the slower pace for departures. The lack of knowledge also seems to present a glaring gap in the resources of the “bamboo grapevine.” Regardless of the knowledge, those that did know of the war did not use the time to leave, as the numbers for January and February were considerably down from previous months. These decisions by the Hoa to stay, whether informed or not, do not create a picture of the panic normally attributed to the flight of refugees from their homes.

New efforts were used to organize finances so that thousands more could leave. Overseas-Chinese organizers throughout Southeast Asia organized a trade network for exit funds with the same efficiency that they had conducted the rice and other trades in the Cholon district of Saigon. Friends and family could place money, on behalf of a person wishing to depart, into a wealthy Chinese businessman’s account abroad. Individuals would receive receipts for gold and a placement on a boat. If the wealthy businessman was likely to leave, he would pay others who had deposited money abroad in Vietnamese đồng in order to offload his holdings. Serving as a gold exchange, these payouts could be in a ration of up to ten đồng for one dollar U.S. This was twice the official government rate²¹. These exchanges fueled a gold shortage in the region and also nearly doubled the price of gold in 1979.²² One woman was interviewed by a western official for the orderly departure program (a visa program designed for the departure of Vietnamese) and the official noted her as saying, “If I’m not accepted in three weeks, I’m going to Malaysia; I’ve already booked.”²³ Indeed, if a booking was all it took, how then

²¹ Barry Wain, *The Refused*, 95 -96.

²² There were of course all of the other machinations concerning currency fluctuations, but each individual leaving would need thousands in gold and therefore the demand helped to increase the value.

²³ Wain, *The Refused*, 67.

could one say that these individuals and families were refugees? The powerful words by the woman indicate an ability to choose. They also represent the attitude concerning the faith and trust placed in organizers for the exit programs run by the Public Security Branch. In order to be a refugee one had to fear persecution from the government. Why then did the ethnic Chinese use the government operated PSB in order to guarantee their departure? Instead of a forced expulsion, the Hoa in Vietnam used these exchanges to insure that individuals could leave when they had the desire and funds available.

The Overseas-Chinese not only profited from the gold paid by the passengers. Many established a black market for goods to sell to the travelers. Some popular items obtained were cigarettes, durable clothing such as jeans, zippers and cloth, and seasickness pills. Every Thursday an Air France flight flew in from Bangkok (AF 198), and most of the goods were transported aboard this plane. A savvy shipper of goods could package a box of up to forty-two pounds and there would be no surcharge on the freight. The popular 555 brand cigarettes could be bought at the duty-free shop in Bangkok for six dollars and sold anywhere on the streets for fifteen to twenty dollars. The Truongs used the black market to purchase camping supplies before they left Vietnam.²⁴ Profit was always a motivator for the Overseas-Chinese. In orchestrating the movement of their ethnic brethren across borders, the ethnic Chinese effectively profited from the Hoa who left Vietnam.

Hong Kong also sought to limit the profit of those engaged in the human trafficking business. With large freighters entering Hong Kong more frequently, the government passed legislation that stiffened penalties for those associated with human

²⁴ Linh Truong interview (questions provided by the author) with wife of Ba Truong and family, February 4-6 2010.

trafficking. The legislation called for: (1) longer prison terms, (2) easier seizure of ships carrying illegal immigrants, (3) making the ship's master prove that those on board were picked up in distress, (4) fines and four years in jail for intentionally disabling/scuttling a vessel within Hong Kong waters, and (5) specifically for the Vietnamese there would be no two-month limit on remaining in the territory.²⁵ The new legislations only marked the beginning of a region-wide response to the inbound Hoa from Vietnam.

The discussions of whether those arriving were refugees or illegal immigrants were reported as mere semantics by *Far Eastern Economic Review* contributor Mary Lee. Her attitude was matched by the UNHCR representative in Hong Kong, Angelo Rasanayagam, who, "...sympathises with the government's wish that Hong Kong [sic] does not become a dumping ground for freighters full of refugees..."²⁶ Semantics, though, were an important part of labeling individuals arriving in Hong Kong. Illegal immigrants could be exported back to their country of origin, refugees were to be housed and resettled elsewhere. Hong Kong had seen legal and illegal immigration rise from China. Legal immigrants went from three-thousand per month in January of 1978 to over eleven-thousand per month in 1979.²⁷ Hong Kong itself had a population explosion from 3.13 million in 1962 to an official 4.7 million in 1979 (by estimates almost six million).²⁸

Another estimate placed the population leap as growing from 4.4 million in 1976 to 5.5

²⁵ Hong Kong Merchant Shipping Ordinance (Amendment) Bill of 1979 (Chapter 369), available online at <http://www.hklii.org/hk/legis/en/ord/369/index.html#s38>, (accessed January 9, 2010). See sections 34, 34A, 35-38. See also Hong Kong Legislative Council, "Official Report of Proceedings," December 12, 1979, available at http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr79-80/english/lc_sitg/hansard/h791212.pdf (accessed January 9, 2010) and Wain, *The Refused*, 110 and Lee, "Putting Up the Barriers," 32.

²⁶ Mary Lee, "Putting Up the Barriers," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 19, 1979, 32.

²⁷ Mary Lee, "Welcome to the Free World – If You Can Find It," 18-19.

²⁸ Mary Lee, "Ill Wind Over Fragrant Harbour," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 25, 1979,

million by 1982.²⁹ Governor Sir Murray MacLehose commented that immigration from China between 1978 and 1979 was almost 250,000. Additionally public sentiment was quickly turning hostile toward the incoming masses.³⁰

Investigations into the *Skyluck* and *Huey Fong* were probing the origin of those on board. While all passengers originated in China, if they had stopped in China, then Hong Kong considered them illegal immigrants. If the passengers did not stop anywhere between Vietnam and Hong Kong, they were refugees. Seventeen individuals arrested aboard the *Skyluck* were Chinese residents of Hong Kong and were charged with human trafficking under the new statutes. Mary Lee noted that, "...after much agonized vacillation between so-called humanitarianism and tenuous bureaucratic argument against letting the Vietnamese in ... [Hong Kong] appears to have calmed down and is reluctantly learning to live with the problem."³¹ In the same article, a politician called for Western politicians to stop making bleeding-heart statements about refugees and "just shut up and take these people off our hands."³² The large freighters clearly caused problems for Hong Kong. Hong Kong's response became less of a humanitarian refugee action and initiated a subversive operation against what it clearly deemed as illegal immigrants and human trafficking.

On the Hong Kong waterfront there existed a building that housed a Hong Kong military unit called the Refugee Ship Unit (RSU). Created in February of 1979, the unit's

²⁹ *Attorney General of Hong Kong v. Ng Yuen Shiu*, [1983] 2 AC 629, [1983] 2 All ER 346, [1983] 2 WLR 735, (99 LQR 499), Hong Kong: Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, 21 February 1983, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b6963c.html> (accessed January 15, 2010).

³⁰ "Hong Kong," in *Asia Yearbook, 1980*, Far Eastern Economic Review, 164-170.

³¹ Mary Lee, "Ill Wind Over Fragrant Harbour," 18-19.

³² *Ibid.*

primary function was to stop the large refugee boats from entering Hong Kong. This policy of attempting to stop only the large boats pointed to a perception that the large syndicate-operated boats housed only illegal immigrants. Those on the large freighters could afford to leave and therefore were not true refugees. Small boats, in fact, often housed equally wealthy individuals and were similar in ethnic and class makeup. Small boats were reluctantly accepted, if not deterred. The percentage of arrivals on small boats was from fifty-five to seventy-two percent of all arrivals in Hong Kong.³³ Depending on their negotiating skill, those onboard the small vessels could have paid less, or even more than those arriving on the large freighters.³⁴ This should have cast the small-boat arrivals as illegal immigrants (called I-I's in Hong Kong circles). The reality was that the large freighters were deemed more of a nuisance. Large freighters posed a publicity problem and hurt resettlement efforts abroad. It was under this construct that the RSU sought to deter refugee ships from arriving in Hong Kong.

The *Huey Fong* freighter would be the example case for which to make the new stance of deterrence against large refugee ships. Having arrived on Dec. 23 1978, the *Huey Fong* was forced to wait in the harbor for one month. While resupplied and medically treated, the RSU and Hong Kong authorities denied entrance to the boat in order to pass the January legislation against human trafficking. Under these new laws the captain of the *Huey Fong*, Hsu Wen-hsin, and nine others were convicted. The *Skyluck* met a similar fate and, upon arrival on 7 February, was forced to remain in the harbor for five months. Those onboard protested by swimming ashore and staging hunger strikes.

³³ Mary Lee, "A Conservative Gesture," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 8, 1979, 14.

³⁴ Wain, *The Refused*, 108.

Eventually, the anchor chains were cut and the boat drifted aground.³⁵ The typical perception of the refugee is that of a person without leverage. If the individuals aboard the *Skyluck* were true refugees and had accepted their fate, there would be no protests or hunger strikes. Those aboard the boat believed they had the leverage and ability to change their situation. The Hoa again exercised their will in actions not typical of refugees.

The RSU operated clandestinely with its own spy network of informants, harbor masters, and shipping contacts throughout Southeast Asia and the world. RSU agents had even gotten into Vietnam and their infiltration and techniques were outside the law. The RSU was not interested in taking people to court, just stopping the vessels trafficking humans. Phone tapping, raids, theft, and harassment were all used in dissuading individuals from picking up ethnic Chinese in Vietnam. Many individuals suspected of considering trafficking were invited into the RSU's waterfront headquarters for intimidating discussions about their intended shipping activity. The radio used by the RSU was powerful enough to pick up the Morse code broadcasts of the port authorities throughout Vietnam.³⁶ The RSU were successful in abating incoming passengers on large ships much like an operation against illegal immigration, not refugees.

One notable failure for the RSU, though, was the freighter *Seng Cheong*. Carrying 1,433 passengers on the 387-ton boat, the refugee runners eluded the RSU.³⁷ The boat was built in the 1960s with a Japanese name and subsequently was called the

³⁵ Wain, *The Refused*, 110 - 111.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Wain, *The Refused*, 115 - 117.

Flying Dragon, the *Tai Sang*, and the *Tyler*. The ship was used for trading but fell into disrepair. The boat left Macao on March 18, 1979 under tow for repairs in Hong Kong and under Panamanian registration like the *Southern Cross* and the *Hai Hong*.³⁸ Once out at sea, the boat left for Vietnam under its own power. RSU knew that the *Seng Cheong* was in Vietnam but little else was known. Once it departed it could not be located through aerial photography or otherwise. RSU sent out radio messages to any listening craft that the *Seng Cheong* did not have permission to enter Hong Kong.³⁹ It is assumed that some repairs were carried out on the vessel after heading to Vietnam, but the whereabouts of the ship are unknown between 18 March and 24 April.

The *Seng Cheong* was known to those on board by a different name. The Truongs had boarded the *Seng Cheong* outside of Vung Tao on April 24, 1979 under the cover of darkness and noticed the name of the ship as the *Sen On*. The date is exact because the night the family was harassed was an important evening. Bay Truong and his wife had their first baby one month prior. Befitting custom, a large “baby party” was thrown one month after the birth.⁴⁰ The ships operators had painted out several letters from the name *Seng Cheong* to form *Sen On*.⁴¹ This was done to subvert the RSU and their efforts at identifying the vessel as a refugee runner. Upon leaving Vietnam the boat headed for Hong Kong. The Truongs then heard that there was engine trouble and problems with

³⁸ Fox Butterfield, “Vietnamese Refugees Beach Ship on Island in Hong Kong Waters,” *New York Times*, May 27, 1979, 8.

³⁹ Wain, *The Refused*, 118.

⁴⁰ Personal interview with Bay Truong, September 10, 2008.

⁴¹ Wain, *The Refused*, 118.

boat. The newly christened *Sen On* made for land at the Chinese island in the South Sea, Hainan.

For three weeks the Truongs were held under close guard by the Chinese military and police on Hainan. The boat was repaired by the Chinese authorities.⁴² Sympathetic villagers from nearby locales would come to help feed those stranded on the beach. The villagers quickly learned that those onboard had money, namely gold and other possessions and began to charge for goods. The military passed out rice porridge daily with little bits of tendon or chives that the children would fight over. The camping equipment purchased prior to departure served the family well as serving dishes and water storage. Villagers would smuggle in goods to the guarded horde on the beach, primarily vegetables and meat to fortify the porridge. These transactions were carried out in Cantonese, of which several family members were fluent due to their Hakka Chinese school education under the *bang* system in Vietnam. Several children snuck into town and were caught by authorities. They were forced to stand atop a hill as punishment for close to eighteen hours. They were then returned to the group. Guarded by military police their boat was repaired and they were forced back to sea.⁴³ Even during these weeks on Chinese territory, the Hoa were treated as illegal immigrants.

On May 26 the *Sen On* entered Hong Kong territory. The RSU's message about the boat not being welcome was clear. The new legislation with stiff penalties was also understood as, during the middle of the night, the crew had abandoned those on board

⁴² Mary Lee, "A Conservative Gesture," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 8, 1979, 14.

⁴³ Linh Truong interview (questions provided by the author) with wife of Ba Truong and family, February 4-6, 2010.

and presumably left for Macau.⁴⁴ The large Truong family had been divided on the boat; Bay Truong, his wife, and newborn daughter were housed in the wheelhouse to protect the newborn. This was not a charitable act on behalf of the transport organizers—a heavy bribe had been paid to ensure their location. Prior to the operators leaving the vessel, they showed a few former South Vietnamese veterans (Bay Truong included) how to operate the boat. They then pointed to the bright lights of Hong Kong as a sense for direction and instructed them to run the boat aground otherwise they would not be allowed to exit the boat.⁴⁵

As the boat crossed the opening to the Pearl River, she was challenged by the Hong Kong port authority. The boat changed course and rammed full speed on a small island west of Lantau Island.⁴⁶ Upon impact, 256 jumped ashore but were rounded up by police. Barry Wain viewed the spectacle and noted,

The *Seng Cheong* was in abominable shape. So badly rusted that refugees could see through the hull in places, it was ankle-deep in human excrement and filth. A single-hold vessel, it had makeshift tween decks crudely welded below, using wooden props, reminiscent of a coal mine of the last century.⁴⁷

The arrival of the *Sen On* brought the total imported boat people population to over thirty-five thousand. Five thousand of those arrived the same week of the *Sen On* and most were housed in an old government dockyard and army barracks. Two boatloads of refugees were picked up by the British ship *Sibonga*, when the captain witnessed those

⁴⁴ Wain, *The Refused*, 118.

⁴⁵ Minh Truong, Nguyet Truong, Chin Truong, and Tam Truong, interview by Daniel Hoover, August 6-10, 2008, in Houston, Texas, digital recording, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX. As well as follow up interviews not recorded.

⁴⁶ Butterfield, “Vietnamese Refugees Beach Ship on Island in Hong Kong Waters,” and Wain, *The Refused*, 118.

⁴⁷ Wain, *The Refused*, 118.

onboard throw a dead baby into the sea. Hong Kong officials were concerned, and Fox Butterfield reported that the *Sen On*, "...appeared to be part of an organized attempt to evade the Hong Kong Government's efforts to limit the arrival of refugees."⁴⁸ This report confirms that the RSU's purpose and operations were known publicly. The RSU focused only on the large freighters, as small junks were allowed in for "health and safety" reasons. Open movements against those arriving in Hong Kong represented a policy against illegal immigration and not a refugee policy. Semantics or not, the international response to those leaving Vietnam turned quickly against the seafarers.

Hoa and Vietnamese Are Not Accepted Abroad

While Hong Kong's semantic balancing act was carried out along the tightrope between illegal immigrants and refugees (large vs. small boats), other nations expressed harsh sentiments. Prime Minister Datuk Hussein Onn announced on January 15, 1979 that Malaysia would no longer allow people to land on the shores under the guise of refugees. Three years of the refugee tide had landed tens of thousands of labeled refugees in the country. In January, Malaysia still had to deal with 30,962 refugees who were waiting for resettlement. Other than the financial burdens placed on the states of Johore and others, Malaysian politics were being affected as political parties were quick to use the refugee situation as a weakness in the current government. National security was an issue as the refugees were seen as possible communist agents sent by Vietnam.⁴⁹ The Prime Minister stated in imperfect English, "The only recourse open to the

⁴⁸ Butterfield, "Vietnamese Refugees Beach Ship on Island in Hong Kong Waters," 8.

⁴⁹ K. Das, "Malaysia Will Take No More," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 26, 1979, 15.

government is to shoo them off.”⁵⁰ Many newspapers reported his statement as “shoot them off.” The method of moving them off was clearly to show the attitude of Malaysia toward those coming from Vietnam.

The Malaysian Navy began to tow out refugee boats, no matter their condition, to the open sea. In a repeat performance of the *Southern Cross* and the *Hai Hong*, Malaysia was quick to expel the unwanted immigrants. One boat, the MH-3012, sank while being towed back out to sea. Of the 230 people on board, only 124 escaped a drowning at sea. Once again UNHCR representative Rajagopalam Sampatkumar championed the cause of those onboard as being refugees. Sampatkumar claimed that one of the refugees had a gunshot wound to the leg. The Malaysians said it was a laceration without gunpowder marks. Sampatkumar was brought to task on the matter and several Malay officials voiced concern over his “diplomacy through the press.”⁵¹ Malaysia argued that the UNHCR was supposed to help the country with resettlement and aid, not make it difficult.

The impassioned dialog of Sampatkumar surfaced again when his revised report circulated the press. Sampatkumar claimed that the refugees had been pillaged, disabled, and left to drift for four days. They were then towed away from Malaysia whereupon the boat began to sink. The refugees and Sampatkumar claimed they had to wait thirty minutes for rescue. Most of the report accepted as fact what those onboard claimed. Malaysian Navy sources were slow to repair any inaccuracies in the report. Regardless of the report, Malaysia ceased accepting any more boat people into the country. Pulau

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ K. Das, “The Sinking of the MH 3012,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 20, 1979, 23.

Bidong, the largest refugee camp/island holding over forty thousand, and other camps (holding around twenty to twenty-five thousand), were already full.⁵² The Malaysian stance was not surprising to Malaysians or even other ASEAN nations.

Indonesia attempted to facilitate handling of the boat people by hosting a conference as well as offering an island (Pulau Galang) for refugee processing. The fear at the conference concerning the processing center was that it would slow the five-thousand per month transfer of refugees to third countries for resettlement.⁵³ The only aid to the outflow came from the United States, which agreed to increase its monthly intake to seven-thousand per month.⁵⁴ Before 1978, Indonesia had only five-thousand from Vietnam. The month of May 1979 brought more than fifteen-thousand, bringing the total to 25,812. Seventeen-thousand of these were housed on the Anambas (mentioned in Chapter Three). Most were towed from Malaysia to get closer to Indonesian waters.⁵⁵ The response was that on June 12, 1979 Indonesia announced it too, would no longer take any more Vietnamese refugees. With the influx rate jumping so quickly, Indonesia was set to overtake Malaysia in terms of refugee totals within two months (July 1979).⁵⁶ Options were quickly closing for those departing Vietnam.

Thailand by far had the worst case of the refugee influx. Most arrivals were true refugees fleeing over the Thai-Kampuchea border away from the Khmer-Rouge. Then even more refugees fled the Vietnamese forces which pushed the opposing army from

⁵² K. Das, "An Accidental Deterrent," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 27, 1979, 22-23.

⁵³ K. Das, "A Solution Loses its Magic," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 11, 1979, 30-31.

⁵⁴ Mary Lee, "Widening the Bottlenecks," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 11, 1979, 30-31.

⁵⁵ David Jenkins, "Indonesia Feels the Strain," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 15, 1979, 30.

⁵⁶ David Jenkins, "Onward to Australia?," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 22, 1979, 20-21.

Kampuchea all the way into Thailand. By October 1979 there were 174,671 refugees in Thailand and that number did not include newer arrivals from Kampuchea.⁵⁷ Thailand already had a reputation for the mistreatment of refugees amongst the Hoa. The marauding pirates on open waters were known to rape, steal, and murder from those boats unfortunate enough to cross paths.⁵⁸ The Khmer-Rouge was known to operate within the refugee camps of the north and frequently used the border areas as shelter from the Vietnamese army. This was the primary reason that the Hoa, who paid for a boat out of Vietnam, tended to end up in Malaysian, Indonesian, or Hong Kong waters. While Thailand accepted the most persons labeled as refugees, once the country closed its borders, the repercussions were severe.

Thailand had begun refusing boats, but on April 13, 1979 Thailand forced seventeen-hundred persons out of Thailand and back into Kampuchea. Weeks later (May 16), a twelve-thousand strong procession of Chinese marched from Kampuchea into Thailand. The Vietnamese ethnic Chinese purge had spread through Kampuchea. These Khmer-Chinese now faced a fate similar to the Hoa of Vietnam. Originally China had taken cause with the creation of ethnic Chinese refugees, but neither China, nor other Western countries did anything to any of the parties to discourage their practice of refusing aid to internationally recognized refugees. One Western diplomat said concerning Thailand's unique position: "America is too preoccupied with Salt-2 to pay serious attention to Thailand's problems ... Meanwhile, the rest of the world is just too

⁵⁷ *Asia Yearbook, 1980*, 111.

⁵⁸ Minh Truong, Nguyet Truong, Chin Truong, and Tam Truong, interview by Daniel Hoover, August 6-10, 2008, in Houston, Texas, digital recording, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX

busy with its own problems to care.”⁵⁹ Under this concept of Western aid, Thailand had little problem in forcing back (*refoulement*) the refugees.

Even while expelling refugees, Thailand was quick to point the finger back at Hanoi. The Supreme Command Chief of Staff, General Saiyud Kerdphol, claimed that Vietnam was using,

...racist expulsion policies that resemble those of the Nazis during World War II. Indeed, if Adolf Hitler had been as indifferent to world opinion as the present [Vietnamese] Lao Dong [Workers’] Party, his “final solution” for the Jews might have been more cheaply and effectively achieved by casting them off on leaky boats, rather than by consigning them to the gas chambers of Auschwitz.⁶⁰

Thailand claimed 250,000 refugees, and roughly 159,000 of those were in the UNHCR camps. Many Lao integrated seamlessly into the highland villages in northeast Thailand. Thirty-six thousand of those refugees along the Thai border were ethnic Chinese Kampuchians who also paid for an exit in gold. In terms of tracking the southern Hoa to Thailand the numbers are difficult to ascertain. The Thai officials and UNHCR counterpart were often overwhelmed with the numbers. The Thai delegate to the Indonesian conference for the creation of the processing center at Pulau Gulang (above) was Winyu Angkhanarak, the under-secretary of state for the interior. He claimed 151,000 refugees were land cases and six-thousand were boat people.⁶¹ The Hoa only traveled by boat in the south as the overland route through Kampuchea was far too dangerous. The Hoa were well aware of the piracy problem surrounding Thailand. It is

⁵⁹ Richard Nations, “The Incident that Jarred Waldheim,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 25, 1979, 20.

⁶⁰ John McBeth, “A Perilously Short Fuse,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 15, 1979, 26-27.

⁶¹ David Jenkins, “An Island in the Stream,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 25, 1979, 18-19.

unlikely that if the Hoa could afford to pay for a boat to leave, they would pay for a boat going into harm's way.

The boat people heading to Malaysia, Indonesia and Hong Kong typically had an eighty percent makeup of Hoa to ethnic Vietnamese. Given this ratio, it is logical to estimate then that Thailand only held 4,800 Hoa boat people in the camps. The more than fifty-three-thousand boat people who left in March 1979 alone put the Hoa exodus to Thailand at a very low rate. Thailand's response to the refugees, like other ASEAN nations, was wrought with combined fears of security, capacity, and cost. The result was the closing of the borders to those arriving from not only Vietnam, but all of Indochina.

Ethnic Chinese left Vietnam in 1979 the same way they had before in 1978. The way they were viewed by the international community changed drastically in those crucial first three months of 1979. Regardless their arrival point or their method of arrival, those who left Vietnam were labeled as refugees. This was certainly true for the Truongs as they found themselves in a refugee camp in Hong Kong.

CHAPTER FIVE

Refugee Camps and Conclusion

As the countries of first asylum refused new arrivals, the ethnic Chinese exercised continuing control over their fate. Waiting in camps to be resettled, the Hoa managed their position well. Whether in refugee camps in the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, or especially Hong Kong, the Hoa strove to ensure the best for their families.

The *Tung An* boat containing 1,898 persons, after arriving in the Philippines, was forced to wait in the Manila harbor for months. The government refused to process those on board immediately as there were thousands that had arrived before them. While the *Tung An* passengers were forced to wait, their processing once in the camps in Manila was quick. From 1975 to April 1979, only 7,461 refugees had arrived in the Philippines and over 3,500 were already resettled. Those that had been able to afford a boat seaworthy enough to reach the Philippines typically had greater wealth and the most Overseas-Chinese contacts abroad. This network, as well as the small number arriving in the Philippines, aided in their quick relocation. Manila's thousands of refugee camp inhabitants were small considering the tens-of-thousands in Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and the hundreds-of-thousands in Thailand. On April 3, 1979 the Philippine government charged eighteen crewmen and the captain of the *Tung An* with the violation of new Philippine immigration laws that were similar to those in Hong Kong. The delay of bringing those aboard to shore was caused by the desire to bring the captain and crew up on charges first.

During the wait for resettlement, many Hoa lost elements of independence. The Filipino resettlement camps were closed camps and did not allow for members to leave the confines of the camp. Even within the primary camp in downtown Manila, the refugees exercised a degree of control for resettlement. Many refugees were offered resettlement in non-Western countries. The Hoa of Vietnam preferred countries with greater economic power and many nations that offered resettlement were refused. Sheila Ocampo in Manila reported for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* that, “Gabon has reportedly offered to take the lot [all refugees], but no one, it seems, wants to go to equatorial Africa.”¹ By the terms of the UNHCR, a refugee could refuse placement to a new country. Even within the confines of a country that did not wish them to be there, the Hoa were still able to exercise control over their fate by refusing resettlement.

In many of the refugee camps there were reported health problems. In Malaysia, the UNHCR representative Sampatkumar reported that three percent of the inhabitants in Pulau Bidong had tuberculosis, twenty percent – mostly children – had skin diseases, two percent had hepatitis and thousands had diarrhea.² Despite the sentimental reports, these numbers indicate that many of those who left Vietnam were actually quite healthy. Given the journey across the sea, the conditions in the camps (where fresh water was hard to come by), and the few supplies given to the refugees for hygiene; the health conditions in Pulau Bidong were better than those in the New Economic Zones back in Vietnam. With over forty-thousand people living in a square kilometer, the health statistics from Sampatkumar concerning disease were not overwhelming. Had there been a pandemic or

¹ Sheila Ocampo, “The Lure of an Island” Philippines section, *Far Eastern Economic Review* pages 19-20.

² K. Das, “A Solution Loses its Magic,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 11, 1979, 31.

outbreak in the camp, the consequences could have been far more severe. While portrayed to the media as in serious need of first aid and medications, those who escaped Vietnam were typically healthier individuals than those who remained in Vietnam.

Although health concerns may have been exaggerated, supply and other needs represented difficulties for those in camps across Southeast Asia. The difficult camp-setting in Pulau Bidong was represented most by the supplies given to those in the camp. Packed rations that were to provide for three days, were twenty-four ounces of rice, a can of baked beans, one can of sardines, eight ounces of watered down chicken stew, and some crackers.³ There were several tankers and barges in charge of bringing fresh water and supplies, as there were no stockpiles on the island. Several fights over fresh water occurred and organized gang activity took place. Despite the conditions, the Hoa managed to aid each other and acquire goods through a black market. Key landmarks within the camp helped identify exactly where one could go for goods. Halfway up “smuggler’s hill” was the center of black market activity.⁴ Goods were exchanged for gold and other items as the Hoa continued their market traditions they developed in Vietnam. This control over capital gave leverage to those within the camps under any conditions of scarcity or need.

The ethnic Chinese in refugee camps in Thailand, such as Ban Don Sawan, received foreign remittances within the camp. An estimated fifty-seven-thousand (US dollars) per month came in from the relatives of refugees.⁵ While the majority of Ban Don Sawan’s camp inhabitants were Laotian, the Sino-Khmer (ethnic Chinese-

³ Guy Sacerdoti, “Tension in a refugee ghetto,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 15, 1979, 23.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John McBeth, “A Perilously Short Fuse,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 15, 1979, 26-27.

Cambodians) used their Overseas-Chinese connections to gain access to relocation quicker.

Hong Kong provided the best of any facilities for those arriving from Vietnam. Sites included the Western Quarantine Anchorage, a government dockyard, a prison on Lan Tau island that was converted to hold up to seven-thousand arrivals. The UNHCR camp Shamshuipo had 4,800 and in 1979 was undergoing renovations to add an extra two-thousand. The UNHCR camps were much nicer than Hong Kong government camps and were described by an official as not being like detention camps but “more like a holiday camp.”⁶ Hong Kong spent more than 110,000 (HK) per day to feed the refugees.⁷ There were two ferries that were devoted exclusively to transporting illegal immigrants and refugees between facilities. The policy that allowed entry to the Vietnamese as refugees but denied the Chinese left one immigration official to comment, “We let the Vietnamese boat people in but send the illegals back...They’re all Chinese, but the government says there’s no more room.”⁸ While immigration officials claimed there was no room, Hong Kong businesses had other ideas.

Hong Kong was always designed to be run on a profit. Still a crown colony, the business interests typically created an order all to themselves. Hong Kong was actually suffering from an acute shortage of labor in May of 1979. Up to 120,000 workers were needed in factories throughout the territory.⁹ The contradiction between policy and economy revealed itself in the open-camp policy for the Hoa from Vietnam. If stationed

⁶ Mary Lee, “Ill Wind Over Fragrant Harbour,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 25, 1979, 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15 -16.

⁹ Comments, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 25, 1979, 16.

in the New Territories, individuals within the refugee camps were allowed to work outside of the camps. The Truongs quickly secured employment in manufacturing and began enjoying a steady income.¹⁰ Despite the official position of the government to actively deny entry to Hong Kong, businesses established both means and motivation for newcomers to obtain jobs upon their arrival.¹¹ The ethnic Chinese from Vietnam did subscribe to the common portrayal of helpless refugees when they found employment in Hong Kong and became self-sustaining.

Those labeled refugees were not viewed as refugees even when they left Hong Kong. Because they were employed, those who left the Hong Kong camps did not fit the preconceived image of what a refugee looked like. One witness in a Western airport described those who arrived as, "...dressed in Cardin shirts and ties or the latest fashions, carrying Samsonite suitcases, stereo equipment and colour television sets."¹² Estimates stated that over fifteen-thousand in the camps were actively employed. Fifty-three from Hong Kong arrived in Copenhagen to the welcome of the Danish Vietnamese community. There were complaints that the arrivals from Hong Kong were better dressed for the cold than those already in the Danish public. Refugee camp inhabitants could earn up to twenty-eight dollars (US) per day. Only a fourth of that would be

¹⁰ Nguyet Truong and Chin Truong interview by Daniel Hoover, August 6-10, 2008, in Houston, Texas, digital recording, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX. And also, Linh Truong interview (questions provided by the author) with wife of Ba Truong and family, February 4-6 2010.

¹¹ Ronald Skeldon, "Hong Kong's Response to the Indochinese Influx, 1975-93," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 534, Strategies for Immigration Control: An International Comparison, (July, 1994), 91-105.

¹² Mary Lee, "A Little More Misery, Please," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 26, 1979, 36.

needed for food.¹³ By their actions within Hong Kong, the Sino-Vietnamese were not refugees, but merely economic migrants. The Hong Kong camps remained open until July 2, 1982, and those arriving in Hong Kong on boats were called refugees until June 16, 1988.¹⁴ For well over ten years, Hong Kong inaccurately labeled those arriving in boats from Vietnam as refugees. The Hoa from southern Vietnam, by controlling their actions, were not refugees.

The numbers of ethnic Chinese in the exodus help define those that left Vietnam as not being refugees. Hong Kong already had a large population of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam within its borders. In the year with the most movement (1979), most of the ethnic Chinese arrived in Hong Kong from North Vietnam. Of the 68,748 who arrived in 1979, 37,536 (fifty-four percent) were from North Vietnam. Only 17,972 (twenty-six percent) came from southern Vietnam.¹⁵ In spite of the movements of all the Hoa in Vietnam, there still were over 700,000 ethnic Chinese that remained in Vietnam after 1979. Of the estimated population of 1.2 million ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam in 1978, only half left by 1979. 1980 saw only 105 ethnic Chinese arrive in Hong Kong from Vietnam.¹⁶ The stark downturn (55,508 ethnic Chinese arrived to Hong Kong in 1979) was matched in the surrounding ASEAN countries. The reports cited in the previous chapter claimed that Hanoi was preparing to expel *all* the ethnic Chinese which would have been a true refugee movement. With less than half leaving, the numbers do

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Leonard Davis, *Hong Kong and the Asylum-Seekers from Vietnam*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 5-17.

¹⁵ Joe Thomas, *Ethnocide: A Cultural Narrative of Refugee Detention in Hong Kong*, Social and Political Studies from Hong Kong, (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2000), 45.

¹⁶ Ibid.

not represent a massive refugee movement out of Vietnam. The actions of those in the refugee camps provided ample evidence that they were not refugees.

The Sino-Vietnamese who left Vietnam during 1978 and 1979 were not refugees. Although they were labeled as such by the international community, their actions and degree of control throughout the experience belie the connotation of a refugee. While the Chinese have had a long history in Vietnam, their presence was seldom accepted, though often tolerated. In 1954, thousands moved south with Bishop Le Hu Tuu, away from communism. They feared persecution from the communist government and in many ways could have qualified as refugees. Their quick assimilation into the South provided for the continued organization of the Chinese community.

The community structure in the South helped to ensure viability for the community. In organizing in the bang structure the ethnic Chinese segregated themselves into a mercantile plutocracy. This segregation allowed for reforms, in both the North and South, to persecute the Sino-Vietnamese in the name of nationalism. These persecutions laid a foundation (before 1975) of unease from which the Hoa would take flight in 1978 and 1979. While these reforms have been labeled as harsh and vindictive, they did not present the basis for the creation of a refugee regime. If the reforms had been so terrible, more ethnic Chinese would have left before 1975. The challenges presented within the twenty years before the communist takeover in 1975 were handled, and in many ways the outcomes controlled, by the ethnic Chinese community itself.

From 1975 to 1978 conditions worsened for the Hoa in Vietnam. Currency reforms, small business laws, and the direct removal of capital all directly affected the Sino-Vietnamese. China was displeased with Vietnam's actions towards the Hoa and

directly attempted to aid the Hoa through diplomacy. These actions served to serve China's interests by maintaining favor and influence on the Indochinese peninsula. Vietnam's actions toward China vis-à-vis Kampuchea helped to destabilize diplomacy and continued to make life uneasy for the Hoa. While the tumultuous three years (1975-1978) brought sweeping changes, the Hoa largely stayed in place. Instances in the north (border disputes, open ports for leaving, and easily attainable Chinese Citizenship) provided for thousands to begin leaving, but they left willingly. The Hoa in the south dealt with tough times as they had in the past. They used the black market and their trade skills in order to obtain hard currency, goods, and services. There was not a rush to the sea in order to leave the country. The Hoa of the south waited until there was an official means of exit. Their exit was to be determined by their Chinese brethren within and outside of Vietnam. These exits would present options to the ethnic Chinese that true refugees would rarely obtain.

Chapter three outlined the different ways of leaving the country and all the options allowed during departure. While this thesis argues that the Hoa of the south were not refugees, it does not wish to state that the exodus from the country was ideal. Conditions described allowed for the fleecing of the Hoa at nearly every step in their willing departure. The message was clear, you could leave when you wanted, but it was to be on terms that the government decided.

The terms that the government worked out were negotiated by ethnic Chinese themselves. Whether a greedy ethnic Chinese shipper from Singapore (Tay Kheng Hong), merchants from Hong Kong (Seng Bee Shipping), or even human traffickers from

Macao (Seng Cheung that took the Truong family); the departure of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam was achieved through Overseas-Chinese contacts.

The initial response to those aboard the *Southern Cross* and *Hai Hong* was correct. The questioning of how to label those thousands of individuals should have been more public. Instead the answer came in an emotional response from Rajagopalam Sampatkumar. The regional UNHCR representative declared all those imprisoned in the harbor off Malaysia as refugees. No matter how inaccurate, once the label was applied it could not be undone.

The international response to those who left Vietnam was more indicative of illegal immigrants than a true refugee exodus. Nation after nation closed its borders. Hong Kong, the preferred destination for the Hoa, created a governmental entity to actively discourage the ethnic Chinese from Vietnam. These reactions against the Hoa took an active role in denying asylum. The Hoa were used by Hanoi as a diplomatic tool against other nations in Southeast Asia. This was opportunistic and profitable to Hanoi and thus it continued its policies. The international community responded not against refugees, but against people exercising their choice to leave a country.

Until the final moment of freedom and resettlement, the Hoa actively pursued control of their affairs. If a refugee is meant to be without leverage, why then did the Hoa manage to achieve so much control throughout their exodus? The answer is simple in that they were not refugees. 1979 saw many nations remove aid to Vietnam. In July 1979, the European Economic Community suspended all aid (primarily food aid for 70 million).¹⁷ By September the ethnic Chinese had largely stopped leaving Vietnam.

¹⁷ Rodney Tasker and David Jenkins, "Cashing in on Public Sentiment," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 13, 1979, 24-25.

Hanoi once again limited who could and could not leave. The Geneva summit that attempted to create Organized Departure program was slow at first. Vietnam did not implement the program while the Hoa were funding Hanoi's coffers through their exodus.¹⁸ It was not until the international community refused the arriving Vietnamese and removed aid that Hanoi was willing to slow the exodus.

One reporter called the exodus of Hoa from Vietnam in 1978 and 1979, "expulsion-cum-extortion" which accurately describes the methodology by which the Hoa left Vietnam.¹⁹ The Hoa have also been labeled as asylum-seekers, the boat people, economic migrants and immigrants. The last two labels have not been used until recently or after those from Vietnam reached their final country of settlement.

To maintain this label of refugee for the Hoa is to continue a false representation of the history behind these people, their story, and their history. When asked if she was a refugee, one Truong family member replied, "yes." When asked if the family was forced to leave Vietnam the response was, "No, we left because we wanted to."²⁰ The response to the second question must now repair the misunderstanding to the first.

¹⁸ K. Das, "Refugees: Rocking ASEAN's Boat," 21-24.

¹⁹ Simon Barber, "Sanctioning a Tougher Course," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 6, 1979, 23.

²⁰ Linh Truong interview (questions provided by the author) with wife of Ba Truong and family, February 4-6, 2010.

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