

# Work as Mission in an Immigrant Community and its Homeland

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## Overview

This paper is based on 20 years of research among Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in the Silicon Valley, and seven years with their relatives in Vietnam. I inquire to what extent Vietnamese-Americans view and justify the work they do as mission, as an activity that brings good to society. I also explore how work as mission percolates into other aspects of their lives. Core Vietnamese values are important and I indicate their connection with work as mission. I also inquire how Vietnamese American perspectives on work compare with those of their relatives in Vietnam.

## Historical Background

In 1975, South Vietnam fell to the Communists of the North. The new regime attempted to impose socialism on the South. At the same time, Vietnam failed to bring in adequate foreign assistance, suffered the American economic embargo until 1994, and became embroiled in border clashes with China and the war and decade-long military occupation of Cambodia. The consequences were disastrous: economic crises, chronic food shortages, and widespread malnutrition. The exodus of boat people refugees began.

Faced with growing disillusion, discontent and resentment of its people, Vietnam initiated a series of economic, political, and social reforms beginning in 1986 known as *doi moi* (renovation). Vietnam improved political relations with its neighbors and the United States. It liberalized policies of control over people. It turned towards capitalism and privatization of some industries. Vietnam attempted to bring in foreign investments, and courted overseas Vietnamese to visit and invest in their homeland.

Since 1986, poverty, malnutrition, and hunger have been reduced, though the country remains desperately poor, and economic growth has been uneven. The private sector accounts for 51 percent of the Gross Domestic Product, of which 10 percent involve foreign investments.<sup>1</sup> In 1999, overseas Vietnamese accounted for 86 percent of the total start-ups registered for that year. In 2000, estimated remittances from overseas Vietnamese to Vietnam will be over two billion dollars, most of them going to relatives.<sup>2</sup>

Overseas Vietnamese are dispersed throughout the world, but about half live in the United States, arriving mainly since 1975. With their children born in the U. S., they number over one million persons. More than 45 percent of these people live in California. Attracted by jobs, the climate, and relatives who have preceded them, they have poured into Santa Clara County, “Silicon Valley,” as new arrivals from Vietnam, but also as secondary migrants from other American cities. They number over 100,000.<sup>3</sup>

Between 1975 and 1985, the top priority of the Vietnamese was to survive economically and recover from the refugee experience. Between 1985 and 1995, they shifted from survival to economic strength and self-sufficiency. New arrivals were immigrants rather than refugees. After 25 years in America, the Vietnamese try to succeed in America while retaining core Vietnamese values. A widely expressed view is “American in the workplace; Vietnamese at home.”

## **America**

The values attributed to work vary greatly among Vietnamese-Americans.<sup>4</sup> In 1994, I met Nga, then 29, an electrical engineer. Born in Vietnam, she came to the United States with her family in 1975, when she was ten.

In high school, Nga received no explicit encouragement to succeed in school, but says that, “Each kid got the message. We didn’t need to be told, we knew the unspoken rule: ‘Do well in school and don’t mess around.’ We never sat down and talked about it, but we followed literally the rule we all understood. My parents were satisfied with my grades, but they gave me no guidance. They trusted me to know what I was doing.”

Nga showed little interest in developing a career or viewing her work in a high tech company as part of a larger mission. Her concern was to blend modern employment with Vietnamese family values. “Here in America,” she said, “I live in two worlds. Outside the house, I am more American, a modern day educated and professional woman. But I still have a role as a homemaker. My career is second to my family.” The following year, Nga gave birth to her first child, and she stopped working at her company. In 1997 she had a second child. She has remained at home rearing her two children.

Thao, 44, was born and lived in Vietnam until she was a young adult. Thao escaped from Vietnam on her tenth try. In the United States, where she arrived in 1981, she received public assistance for two months; then she took a job as a photo technician so that she could send money back to Vietnam to help her brothers and sisters. In 1983, she bought her first home. In 1988, she bought her second home, a spiffy condo in a rising middle class neighborhood.

During the day, Thao is a counselor for Vietnamese students at a vocational college that emphasizes high-tech jobs, and she sees this job as helping to improve her community. She also takes classes there. During the swing shift, she works at the photo lab. She used to sing with a band and still does occasional benefit concerts. Work dominates her life, and her schedule is hectic: vocational counseling from 10 A.M. to 5 P.M.; the photo technician job from 10 P.M. to 6 A.M. from Sunday through Thursday; then three hours of sleep from 6:30-9:30 A.M. She studies mutual fund investing on Wednesday night and Saturday morning, and she earns commissions. On Wednesday night, she gets no sleep. Her only free nights are Friday and Saturday. She fills these by enrolling in motivational seminars on self-improvement.

She comments,. “The Vietnamese teach you to accept your destiny, be satisfied with what you have. I don’t agree with that. I want to control my own life, to improve myself. In Vietnam, we waste a lot of time. We gossip a lot and drink coffee for two or three hours. I want to spend my time differently, smarter. In

America, I learn to manage my time and use it well. I want to improve myself, work hard, make money, support myself and have a good life. I used to be very shy and insecure. Now I am very open and confident in myself. I believe I'm doing good, and I get better every day. Nothing can stop me. I can do what I want.”

Mary who uses a Western name, is a 33 year old Vietnamese woman, whom I interviewed in 1999 and in 2000. She is the mother of two boys born in 1995 and 1997. She has worked in three high tech companies, and she has internalized the management values of efficiency and organization, which she learned at her first job. Mary leaves much of the child rearing and household chores to her Vietnamese-American husband, whose own federal government job gives him greater flexibility of hours.

Mary does not take work assignments home with her, but at home, she has started to develop a web site that might be used for a business. She has brought her idea back to her company, contacted a senior vice president, and has been one of a handful of employees encouraged to develop her idea. Through the internet, she has enlisted the support of several people for designing the website and formulating a business plan. Her website will provide an important informational service for young Asian professionals. A professional career, important for her in the office, now dominates her home life, profoundly affecting her time and interactions with her husband and children.

At the age of 25, Hao opened a dental practice in the Silicon Valley that caters to Vietnamese patients. He advertises on Vietnamese radio shows with public service announcements that give tips concerning dental care. He and some college friends do a radio show to explain to parents and students the importance of attending college and the process for applying. He uses his standing as a health professional to help his community.

Attitudes towards work as mission are seen in the ways parents socialize their children. Vietnamese-Americans pressure their children to do well in school to prepare them for prestigious and high-paying occupations: engineering and computers, health professions, especially physician and dentist, and business, especially accounting.

Susan, twelve years old, receives a double message, to become a professional or to marry one. Susan's father told her to become a doctor, to be independent and not let people push her around; her mother told her to become “sexy.” Her parents told her older brother to become an engineer. On the wall next to the kitchen table is an oversized poster of a huge mansion at the seashore, flanked on one side by a multi-car garage containing luxurious limousines and exotic racing cars. Susan's mother explained to me, “We have sacrificed for our children now; we have spent all our money on our kids; we also spend for them to take music and martial arts lessons, and have bought a new piano. We will give them a good education so that they can get a good job. Then they can recall what their parents did for them and can help us in return. Meanwhile, we say to them, look at your cousins, the five kids in the family of your father's older brother. The first son, an engineer, is working for a masters degree; the second son is an engineer and the last three, girls, are a dentist, an engineer, and a student who has almost completed engineering school. All are well educated. The older ones have taught the younger ones, providing them a good example. I tell my kids, ‘learn from that family.’”

Engineering and medicine are the roads to financial success and prestige. Susan's mother once worked in the electronics industry. She did this for her family, not for a wider social good. She quit and went into cosmetology, where her hours were more flexible. This also enabled her to drive her children to various lessons. Similarly, Susan's father works to make money; he hopes his children will succeed so that they can buy him a nice retirement house by the seashore. The children say they want to help their family.

Susan's father has brought home two computers, a cellular phone, and two pagers. The children use one computer for homework assignments. They and their mother also use it to play games. Susan's father, a licensed contractor, assembled the other computer and uses it for his new contracting business, to search for information on the internet, and for games. He uses the cellular phone and pager for his work and to contact his wife to coordinate driving the children to their lessons. Their counseling and investment in their children's education, the lessons they pay for, and the ways they use their new technological devices reveal a clear plan to prepare their children for professional careers.

## **Vietnam**

Vietnamese Americans often take for granted their Vietnamese values. In recent years, this assumption has been challenged. In the 1990s, as relations improved between the United States and Vietnam, Vietnamese Americans returned to Vietnam in large numbers. In 1993, 1994, and 2000 I accompanied several people as they returned to their homeland, reestablishing connections with their ancestral homes and reaffirming their cultural roots. They saw themselves as Vietnamese and assumed that the residents of Vietnam viewed them similarly. They were shocked when they were viewed and treated as outsiders: charged higher prices for train and airline tickets than local residents. They differed significantly from their hosts in the ways they spoke Vietnamese, in their physical appearance, body language, and core values.

Thu, a high school math teacher, escaped from Vietnam at the age of 15 and returned ten years later. "I tried to pass as a Vietnamese by wearing slippers and local clothes, but I fooled no one. I always considered myself Vietnamese; at home in the United States, we speak Vietnamese, though with a mixture of English. But now I realize I have American values. I have been educated in America. On the train, the Vietnamese tossed trash out the window onto the green mountains. We found this disturbing. We put our trash in a plastic bag and handed it to the conductor; he threw it out of the train. The Vietnamese live for themselves, not for society, the environment, or the future. They are too busy making a living to care about anything else."

Chi, a 28 year old computer programmer, says, "I sense an overwhelming negativity here. In America, you see a sense of opportunity and growth; if you work hard, you can achieve. But in Vietnam, people seem to be held back. They have no sense of direction except for taking advantage of immediate profit for the moment without thought of tomorrow. Everywhere, you are stopped by petty corruption and harassment. It's very discouraging. I think Vietnam has changed from what I remember. Or maybe it is I who have changed. After living in America, I have a different perspective on Vietnam."<sup>5</sup>

These Silicon Valley overseas Vietnamese find that their views of work as mission, infused with values from American educational institutions and the high-tech American workplace, do not fit in Vietnam. One reason is that Vietnam has had difficulty shifting from socialist to capitalist enterprises. Problems include undeveloped infrastructure, the lack of transparency of government business policies, a widespread perception of government corruption, and an insufficient legal structure to cover foreign investments as well as domestic enterprises.<sup>6</sup> This has discouraged both foreign and domestic investors. In September, 2000, I met with a high official in the Ministry of Trade. Over dinner at his house, he discussed his activities and Vietnam's problems. He had worked for years to open up Vietnam for foreign investments and new economic developments. He said, "Ten years ago, we developed a plan for software development in Vietnam. The government refused to accept it, and for ten years did nothing. Now we are way behind."

His views are echoed in the English-Language Vietnam News. In September, 2000, it documented Vietnamese government policies that hinder the development of Vietnam's computer assembly industry. The

tax on imported spare parts was double that on imports of complete computers, thereby making it difficult for enterprises in Vietnam to profit from computer assembly. In addition, the Ministry of Industry had drafted a 25 million dollar strategy to develop the hardware industry. It had submitted this to the Government two years ago. "So far, there has been no reply from officials."<sup>7</sup> Many officials are truly uneasy and conflicted about new changes; they prefer to hold back on accepting new developments when they feel unsure of the consequences.

Official spokesmen often have to perform a balancing act, espousing socialism while pushing for some capitalist reforms.<sup>8</sup> Publications praise and condemn high technology in the same issue. An example in the Vietnam Economic News is the positive article, "Can VN Hold Back the Internet Revolution," followed by "Techno-Snob Mobile Mania," which complains that, "More than a few are squandering their hard-to-earn money on calls using mobile phones."<sup>9</sup>

A second problem is extensive poverty and underemployment in Vietnam. The past couple of years have been especially difficult. Poverty affects rural people, but also government officials and many professional persons, who must scramble to supplement their incomes simply to feed their families or educate their children. The focus is not on work as mission, but work as survival for the family. In 1993, the chief cardiac surgeon at a major hospital in Central Vietnam earned \$15 a month; in 2000 her salary was \$85 a month, supplemented with fees from a private practice for wealthy patients. A medical doctor in a remote area of the Central Highlands told me that his salary is so low that he cannot afford to send his children to high school; they cultivate a garden near his house.

Vietnam has some highly successful business and technical people. I first met Hieu in Ho Chi Minh City in 1993, when he was 33 years old and working in a firm that refurbished ships. By 2000 he owned a photography shop that prints and sells film for a major film manufacturer. Located on a central street of Ho Chi Minh city, with a monthly rent of \$2500, it is the largest shop for this film in Vietnam. Hieu employs 20 persons, and his copy machines and film development equipment, computers, digital cameras, and inventory of equipment for sale are worth several hundred thousand dollars.

Hieu born in Central Vietnam, was not a good student, and he dropped out of school in the fifth grade. He speaks only Vietnamese. Hieu's paternal uncle found the boy work in a photography shop. Hieu was 15 years old when South Vietnam collapsed. Hieu ingratiated himself with local officials by taking photos of them and their families. They liked his work, they liked him, and they helped him launch his career by contacting officials in Ho Chi Minh city, who got Hieu the job in a ship outfitting company. Hieu worked for a North Vietnamese official who had no experience in running a business. Hieu worked hard, established a network of contacts, and rose quickly to become indispensable and run the business. He set up his own business in 1995. He still does favors for his ex-boss and is on good terms with him.

He says, "My success comes from my filial piety. I had to demonstrate to my parents that I could succeed. So I worked hard to show them I could succeed."

A key element in his success is his networking with officials, giving and receiving favors. Hieu's wife complains that he spends too much time networking away from home. Hieu replies, "She does not understand. She thinks I should work, go home and be with the children. But that's not how you build up a business. You do it by meeting people, spending time and doing things for them. Then you can succeed."

## Final Comments

New kinds of work and new contexts in which they occur have far-reaching effects on family in The United States and Vietnam. But core Vietnamese values of family and education also influence the ways in which work is viewed. The primary obligation is to family; education is a means to return something to the family. In America, ideally a child succeeds in a highly paid professional occupation; in Vietnam, the opportunities are much more limited, but success may occur in other ways.

In both the U.S. and Vietnam, families that struggle financially seem less open to work as mission, unless mission is defined in terms of family. As families become more financially secure, young professionals may begin to use their technical expertise for work as mission in community service; and younger members of the family may turn to occupations in which work as mission means more to them.

In America, providing a better education for children, including a well-rounded background, affects the daily routines of parents, their financial expenditures, and how they rear their children. It also exposes children to American values in which some kinds of work are seen as providing wider social benefits. Some American values conflict with Vietnamese family values. Families attempt to resolve this by being “American in the office and Vietnamese at home.” But as the examples in this paper show, work and home are blurring; Vietnamese and American are not easily separable or compartmentalized. New concepts, including work as mission, are likely to be brought into families of Vietnamese descent, along with other values that were neither sought nor expected.

## References Cited and Endnotes

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- 2 *Vietnam Investment Review*, No. 464, Sept. 4-10. 2000, page 5.
- 3 For further details, see James M. Freeman *Changing Identities: Vietnamese Americans, 1975-1995*. Needham Heights, MA, Allyn & Bacon, 1995.
- 4 See also *Changing Identities: Vietnamese Americans, 1975-1995*, pp. 60-61; 67-68; 78-81; 130-131.
- 5 For additional details, see *Changing Identities: Vietnamese Americans, 1975-1995*, pp. 120-125.
- 6 See, for example: Robert Frank, “Withdrawal Pains: In Paddies of Vietnam, Americans Once Again Land in a Quagmire.” *The Wall Street Journal*, Friday, April 21, 2000, pp. A1, A6; *Vietnam: Private Solutions for Infrastructure: Opportunities for Vietnam. The World Bank in Vietnam*, Hanoi, 1999; *Vietnam:*

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7 *Vietnam News*, Tuesday, September 26, 2000. P. 11.

8 *Vietnam News*, Tuesday, September 26, 2000, p. 6.

9 *Vietnam Economic News*, No. 37, Vol.X, September 12-18, 2000, page 20.