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STAYS ALIVE
WHEN ITS
CULTURE IS
ALIVE.**

**HOPE NEVER
DIES IN THE
INDOMITABLE
VIETNAMESE
MIND.**

- **SACEI Newsletter** updates you on the latest news about Vietnamese-America.
- It serves as a link between **SACEI** members and those who are interested in the **Vietnamese or Vietnamese-American** culture.

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SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE



To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese-American Culture

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Walk, Run, Cha-Cha *Laura Nix*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/01/opinion/dance-immigration-vietnam.html?>

"Walk, Run, Cha-Cha" is one of 10 films shortlisted for the 92nd Academy Awards in the Documentary Short Subject category.

If you crossed paths with Paul and Millie Cao, a middle-aged couple who work in California as an engineer and an auditor, you might not guess that every chance they get, they put on sequin-covered costumes and head to a dance floor, where they transform into passionate ballroom dancers. That is where I met them six years ago, when I wandered into Lai Lai Ballroom and Dance Studio. They were part of a group of older Asian-Americans dancing the rumba in a room lit like a nightclub in suburban San Gabriel Valley, near Los Angeles.

I took dance classes at the studio for a year and discovered most of the instructors are professional ballroom dancers from Russia and Eastern Europe. Almost all their students come from the Asian diaspora — mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Paul and Millie's country of origin, Vietnam. I struggled in waltz classes taught in Mandarin and learned the Taiwanese Tango from generous students who offered to show me the steps.

Eventually, I became friends with Paul and Millie, and their Latin-dance teachers, Maksym Kapitan-chuk and Elena Krifuks. Paul and Millie have been known to practice four to five nights a week after work, diligently training their bodies for competitions and showcases, where they perform tightly choreographed routines wearing elaborate outfits. I began making this film motivated by the question, "What makes these two people so dedicated to dancing?"

Over time, I learned Paul and Millie's story of fleeing Vietnam as young lovers to come to the United States. Their back story is both ordinary and extraordinary, representative of many refugees who are forced to rebuild their lives. Creating a new life in America required Paul and Millie to reinvent themselves. While learning how to speak English, they worked multiple jobs, finished their college degrees, took care of their parents while raising a child and embarked on professional careers. Finding a way to survive defined their adult lives; they didn't have time for the extras.

Faced with middle age, Paul and Millie chose to reinvent themselves again. After decades of delayed gratification, this time they focused on what gives them joy. As you'll see in this Op-Doc, dance opened up a world of self-expression and pleasure for the couple, sparking a transition from responsible professionals to flamboyant performers pursuing their creative dreams. On the face of it, a film about middle-aged people dancing might not seem political. But my decision to tell a story about Paul and Millie's life in the present, and not solely focus on their past, was intentional. Films about refugees and immigrants are often focused on the point of entry, when the newly arrived are at their most vulnerable. But it's essential for us to hear stories about what happens next.

Paul and Millie are refugees from Vietnam. Paul and Millie are also working professionals, parents, dancers and American citizens who have lived in California for over 40 years. As with many Americans who started their lives in another country, their story embodies resilience and courage. Love and longing. Separation and reunion. These themes are visually reflected in the dance itself, in their tender glances, when he lifts her to the sky, the yearning in their gestures — their ability to transform adversity into beauty.

The LẠC VIỆT Boat *Nghĩa M. Vo*

Since immemorial times, the image of the boat has always evoked departure, separation, and loss. It causes many of us to break into tears because it evokes a disconnection of human bonding, no matter how temporary it was. One could not look at or think of it without a tightening of heart. Men who were understandably mystified by and afraid of the unknown tended to shy away from stepping on any boat. Despite forcing us to leave behind sweet memories, comfort and safety, a boat also takes us into the unknown, the uncharted world. It, therefore, represents a connection between the known and the unknown. Those who liked to explore the unknown enjoyed using a boat to go here and there and to expand their horizon.

Although aware of this dichotomy, our *Lạc Việt* (1) forefathers still used the boat as the symbol of their young nation, which they carved on their bronze drums (2) some two-and-a-half millennia ago. They knew that although traveling or exploring involved risks, the process was needed to further their knowledge and to search for new lands, new resources, and new ways of life. It was an essential need for humankind. A boat has also been used through history to escape harsh environment, infertile lands or authoritarian regimes.

Leaving a known environment for an unknown world involved two processes: decision making and risk analysis. The Plymouth Pilgrims made the fateful decision to leave Europe for an uncharted territory across the ocean. In the process, they founded a new land they called America. Similarly, when the South Vietnamese made the fateful decision to leave their country following its collapse in 1975, most of them did not know where they were heading to. They did not have any visa or work permit from any country; they neither knew nor studied the language and customs of the world, and most of them did not even carry any paper or documentation with them. They did not have any other choice: it was either freedom or enslavement under a communist regime. That initial and spontaneous escape, which was followed by a flood of other departures resulted in the largest sea diaspora in the world. These modern seafarers came in waves and in all kinds of boats. They assumed all the risks because the process of leaving the country on such a scale and on the spur of the moment had rarely been accomplished before. They, therefore, qualified as the modern Pilgrims of the world.

Like a newborn infant who separates from his/her mother at birth, or a teenager who leaves home to follow his/her lover, a separation suggests moving from a dependent status to an independent one. While some departures are accomplished on a willful basis, others are forced. Departures, like in the Vietnamese diaspora of 1975, are not only forced on the individuals involved, but also accepted in a willful manner: forced because under the guns of the communists, they chose freedom over slavery, and willful because they made the choice on their own. Many, however, could not leave the country for some reason or another. Others, despite the risks of facing the enemy head on, opted to stay back. These were the choices they had to make for themselves.

The unknown risks of escaping abroad by boat were numerous and included: encounters with the local or state police, loss of jobs and property, beating, jailing, death at sea, encounters with violent pirates, rapes, murders, (3) technical problems (engine failure, vessel breakdown, food, water and fuel shortage, directional loss), medical emergencies, sea storms, denial of boat landing, and asylum problems. The seafarers did not know the extent and the severity of all these risks when they first decided to take off. Nor could they predict all of them with accuracy. Like the pilgrims of yesteryears, they were entirely powerless during their migrations.

Besides these almost insurmountable hurdles, are the garden varieties of emotional problems, immediate and delayed, these voyagers could also experience feelings of fear, confusion, guilt, nostalgia, and emotional losses in the face of such a sudden and seemingly permanent disconnection. They sensed that this would be the last time that they were able to see their fatherland alive. They neither wanted to stay with the communists nor completely cut off their umbilical cords. Unable to resolve that dichotomy, a few became desperate, jumped off their vessels in front of *Vũng Tàu* and drowned themselves. They became the first victims of the diaspora. Others sailed all the way to the island of Guam and with a delayed change in heart decided to return to Vietnam on the *Thương Tín I* boat, one of the boats they used in their maiden voyage to Guam.

The rest, as we know, continued their voyage to the unknown and established many new Vietnamese "colonies" abroad, the largest one being located in the United States. In the book, you are about to read the personal feelings and experiences of a group of pilgrims who dared to take on the seas and the unknown so that their offspring could live in freedom.

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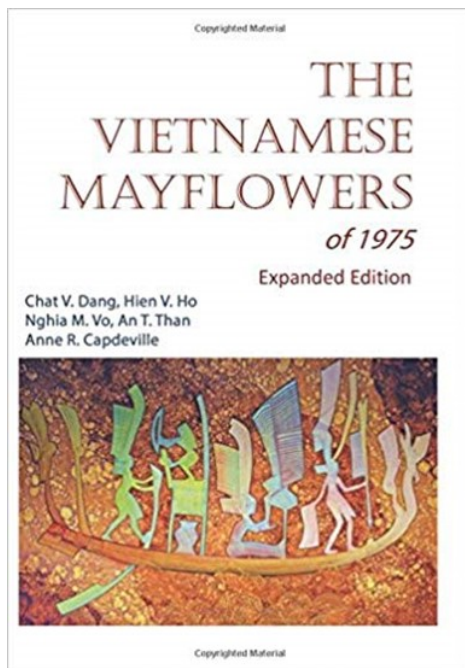
The LẠC VIỆT boat...

It is fitting that a book that deals with the largest modern sea migration due to an armed conflict be symbolized by the picture of the *Lạc Việt* boat which is gracefully depicted on the front cover.

(Reprinted from Dang, Chat et al. *The Vietnamese Mayflowers of 1975*, Charleston, SC, Book Surge, 2009, pp. 12-13)

Notes

1. Lạc Việt or Lạc Yuê denote the tribes that lived in present day Guangxi of southern China and the lowland plains of North Vietnam. They were the precursors of the Vietnamese and were associated with the Bronze Age Đông Sơn culture of Southeast Asia.
2. A Đông Sơn or Heger type I bronze drum is a bronze drum made by the Đông Sơn culture in the Red River delta of North Vietnam (600 BCE to 300 CE). The Chinese had also their own bronze drum culture. Đông Sơn drums are musical instruments and cult objects. The casting of a bronze drum is shown in this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7gJFe6WFDj4>
3. Death at seas was estimated to be from 222,000 to 500,000 people. Tam Hong. "Altruistic Deeds" in Nguy Vu. *Risking Death to Find Freedom*. Westminster, CA, NV Press, 2005: p. 119.
4. The Vietnamese are Austroasiatic people who live on land: they were never seafarers. On the other hand, the Austronesians coming from Taiwan, Indonesia, the Philippines were seafarers.



Bronze drum

The Army Medical Service Corps in Vietnam James Straten

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ton7A_r_dhl&t=3867s

James Van Straten retired from the Army as a colonel. He served with the Army Medical Service Corps in Vietnam, 1966-1967. He trained South Vietnamese medical units and brought much-needed medical help to hundreds of South Vietnamese civilians. His work was closely linked to the US military's pacification/"hearts and minds" work in South Vietnam. This discussion springs from Mr. Van Straten's memoir "A Different Face of War" (University of North Texas Press). <https://warandlifediscussions.weebly....> Veterans who served in any war zone in any capacity and would like to share their memories are invited to contact pjones@jbu.edu. Preston Jones teaches at John Brown University.

Pressure Grows on Vietnam Over Jailing Dissidents

<https://www.ucanews.org/news/pressure-grows-on-vietnam-over-jailing-dissidents/86759>

ucanews reporter, Ho Chi Minh City
Vietnam

December 6, 2019

Concern is growing about Vietnam's increasing oppression of dissidents and the use of severe prison sentences to silence any opposition to its communist government.

The Australian government is being urged to ramp up pressure on Vietnam to reverse the convictions of a detained Australian citizen and two of his Vietnamese colleagues.

Australian Chau Van Kham and colleagues Nguyen Van Vien and Tran Van Quyen were sentenced to 12, 11, and 10 years respectively on Nov. 11 by the People's Court in Ho Chi Minh City for their involvement with the overseas Viet Tan party, which Vietnam considers a terrorist organization.



Australian citizen Chau Van Kham (left) is escorted for trial in Ho Chi Minh City on Nov. 11. He was jailed for 12 years on terrorism charges in the one-party state where anti-government criticism often leads to lengthy jail terms. (Photo: AFP)

In a letter to Australian Foreign Minister

Marise Payne released on Dec. 4, Human Rights Watch (HRW) called on Canberra to publicly and privately press the Vietnamese government to overturn the convictions.

"Payne has rightly condemned the detention conditions [in China] of the Australian writer Yang Hengjun and urged his release, so it is puzzling that there has been no similar statement raising concerns about Chau Van Kham's treatment even though he has been detained since January," said Elaine Pearson, Australia director for HRW.

"There are serious concerns about lack of due process and the severity of the sentences following what can only be described as a show trial."

On Dec. 2, Payne called for Hengjun's release and described his treatment by Chinese authorities as "unacceptable."

Viet Tan has explicitly rejected violence, stating that it is "convinced that nonviolent means are the most effective for generating maximum civic participation ... to contribute to Vietnam's modernization and reform."

State media said the three defendants were found guilty of "conducting terrorist activities to oppose the people's government" under the country's Criminal Code.

They were accused of being members of Viet Tan, a democracy and human rights organization based in the US that is listed as a terrorist group by Vietnam's Public Security Ministry. Viet Tan aims to quash the leadership of the Communist Party and overthrow the communist government, prosecutors claimed.

Criminalizing democratic activities

Kham entered Vietnam with false identity papers from Cambodia in January, recruited Vien to his group and gave him US\$400 before they were arrested in Ho Chi Minh City, it was claimed. Quyen was accused of receiving US\$900 from Viet Tan to work for it.

The court sentenced three other Vietnamese citizens aged 27-36 to three or four years in jail for providing false documents from public bodies for Quyen.

Dissident lawyer Le Cong Dinh said the judge had used lists of terrorist groups given by the Public Security Ministry as legal reasons to convict the defendants. The ministry is not a legislative body with the authority to list terrorist groups, he said.

Dinh, a former political prisoner, said the judge should have demonstrated Viet Tan to be a terrorist group before convicting

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Pressure Grows on VN...

the defendants of terrorist activities. He said the court had shown itself to be a puppet whose strings are pulled by the police.

Christian lawyer Nguyen Van Dai accused the government of criminalizing human rights and democratic activities.

"The communist government considered peaceful and nonviolent activities by opposition political organizations and their members as terrorist activities," Dai said.

Dai, head of the domestic Brotherhood for Democracy regarded as a reactionary group by the government, said the government used wrongful convictions to terrorize people so that they dare not continue to fight for human rights and social democratization, thus protecting the communist regime.

Dai called on all people to support and join Viet Tan, Brotherhood for Democracy and other groups to challenge the communist government.

Kham will be forced to leave Vietnam after finishing his sentence, while the two others will be on probation for five years after serving their jail terms.

Kham, who is appealing his sentence, has had limited access to legal representation and his consular visits are monitored.

Lunar New Year: 25 January, 2020

A lunar calendar repeats itself every 60th year because each zodiac cycle has 12 animals and 5 elements (metal, water, wood, fire, earth). The metal rat, for example, occurred in 1960 and comes back in 2020.

Rats are clever, quick thinkers; successful but content with living a quiet and peaceful life.

Men born in the Rat year are clever and adapt quickly to new environments. They are creative great at taking advantage of opportunities. However, they sometimes lack the courage to do so. Although they have great ideas, they might not be suitable for leadership positions.

Women born in the Rat year are the traditional women. They love keeping things organized and place great value on the family. Everything is taken care of by them and there is no need for their husband to worry. Outside of home, they're also someone with a sense of responsibility and ability.

Year	Zodiac	Element
1936	Rat	Fire
1948	Rat	Earth
1960	Rat	Metal
1972	Rat	Water
1984	Rat	Wood
1996	Rat	Fire
2008	Rat	Earth
2020	Rat	Metal

