



## ***The American Dream in Vietnamese***

**Nhi T. Lieu** (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011)

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**Review by Isabelle Flemming, first published in**

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The Vietnamese who arrived on American shores after the fall of Saigon in 1975 entered as homeless exiles. They were determined to create a niche for themselves in the American culture without giving up their own cultural values or memories. While the first wave of immigrants tended to be educated and from higher social circles, those who arrived later, the “boat people”, were poor, desperate refugees who brought little with them. The earlier arrivals sought to replace the image of boat people or helpless refugees with a vision of robust people who fit well into the American culture and did not drain its resources for their needs. They chose to retain their memories of the homeland but were vigorously opposed to the communist regime of the old country. They sought a vehicle for their integration into the American mainstream and found it in capitalism and cultural production. Conservative and unwilling to be anathematized in their new country, the American Vietnamese have striven to project themselves as non-dependent, to distance themselves from the image of unfortunate “boat people,” and have begun to enter into American politics.

Carving a new niche in studies of Vietnamese immigrants, Nhi Lieu focuses on how cultural and media creations of the immigrants shaped their Vietnamese American identity. Through vehicles such as beauty pageants, movies, live shows and music

they were able to convey a sense of community and respect for their own roots. These cultural productions fostered nostalgia but also carried messages about appropriate behavior, female beauty and, indirectly, about consumerism.

Reflecting the desire of their Vietnamese audiences, who wished to model themselves to fit into American culture without losing their sense of Vietnamese identity, the creators incorporated notable American concepts such as capitalism and conspicuous consumerism into their productions. American companies in Viet Nam had hired the Vietnamese, introducing them to a capitalist economy. Further, the government hired newly arrived social elites from Viet Nam as counselors and mediators to resettlement in America. These same elites would eventually regain their social standing and prove influential in governing the American Vietnamese communities.

The satisfying experience of having jobs and income with which to purchase goods and luxuries was not lost on the immigrants. Although not foregrounded, the book’s mention of American activity in Viet Nam, and subsequent withdrawal without keeping the promise of freeing the Vietnamese from communist rule, makes it clear that our role in that country was not entirely welcomed or appreciated by the Vietnamese. Nevertheless, in their adopted land, they embrace democracy and work to enter America’s main culture, even seeking political positions.

American Vietnamese have built communities throughout the United States that serve as a venue for cultural production, for stores that sell Asian American and specifically Vietnamese foods and merchandise, as well as providing a gathering place where the native language can be spoken and ideas exchanged. In her book, Lieu has focused on an area called Little Saigon located in Orange County, California. Little Saigon, a home to roughly 200,000 Vietnamese Americans is a major source of the production of cultural media and a place where social and political issues can be discussed and absorbed. A large part of *The American Dream in Vietnamese* is dedicated to in-depth discussion of the Vietnamese entertainment industry and its influence on its consumers. A series of videos, comprised of variety shows created by Thuy Nga Productions and called *Paris by Night*, commemorates the past while also addressing contemporary issues such as cultural assimilation. There is another aspect to their great popularity: “[T]hey actively poach American popular culture.”[93] Most significant is the fact that they introduce messages about Vietnamese female beauty and appropriate modes of behavior, gender, political issues, and other matters that shape the Vietnamese American experience. Lieu states, “I maintain that the *Paris by Night* stage both reinforces and tests the boundaries around notions of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and identity for the Vietnamese diaspora.”[106]

The *Paris by Night* series, other popular media productions, and beauty pageants have given young Vietnamese women models that they wish to imitate. While advertisements encourage purchase of clothing and beauty products, a more radical means to achieve the ideal of the Vietnamese female is through plastic surgery. For those with the means, plastic surgery is a widely accepted procedure for enhancing beauty. This very conspicuous show of consumption deepens the sense of fitting into American culture in its role as a capitalist, consumer-oriented society. As Lieu says, “This selective participation in whiteness is intimately linked to the narrative of assimilation and the increased commodification of bodies in American popular culture.”[76] Aside from their entertainment

value, all these media types also carry a strongly anticommunist message, reflecting the conservative nature of the American Vietnamese culture.

Nhi Lieu is well equipped to explore and discuss the tenets proposed in her book. As a Vietnamese American herself, and with parents who can represent attitudes of the older generation, she has direct *entrée* into the culture she studies. She has also done an outstanding job of research to reinforce her suppositions. Surveys conducted online, review of the literature, and close scrutiny of the cultural productions themselves, have provided a wealth of information that Nhi Lieu weaves into a fascinating story of the Vietnamese seeking the American Dream, and of their now global presence on the Internet.

I highly recommend reading this book, which is notable both for the new insights and information it conveys but also for the well-conducted research that went into the project. The book includes end notes and a full Index. There is far more in this book than is discussed in the review, and it merits the attention of other scholars and the general public alike.

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