

# **From Sài Gòn to San Diego: A Refugee's Story**

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Introduction to Asian American History

Asian Americans have persisted in the United States for hundreds of years, with each individual containing the unique stories of a journey undertaken by them or a relative to an unfamiliar place. Within the extraordinary diversity of both Asia and Asian America, no two journeys to the United States are the same. Of course, some have more in common with others and some are widely accepted as mainstream immigration narratives, but all are unique. Based on a variety of factors, like chronology, ethnic group, politics, diplomacy, economics, and more, these experiences and narratives will generally fall under broader immigration wave categories. Some characterize two distinct periods of Asian American immigration: the period before and after the passage and implementation of the Immigration Act of 1965, otherwise known as the Hart-Celler Act. Prior to this act, American immigration policy directly discriminated against Asians and denied them of immigration rights, citizenship, and even property ownership through oppressive policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. With the passage of the Hart-Celler Act, discriminatory aspects of prior immigration law were dissolved and the United States began to accept up to 290,000 immigrants per year, with 170,000 spaces allocated to nations in the Eastern Hemisphere (Lee 316). The Hart-Celler Act prioritized immigrants based on a number of criteria, namely family reunification, educational level, occupational prestige, and skill sets, paving the way for a more homogenized perception of Asian Americans as high achieving, highly educated, and high income communities under the broad model minority myth (Lee 316-319). However, not all Asian Americans fit into this category of immigrant. Hundreds of thousands of people came to the United States faced with no other choice but to become refugees, fleeing their homes due to war, political unrest, poverty, and the fear of death or something worse. For Dương Thuý Hằng, or Shelley Kertcher, and her family, this was the

reality. Kertcher chronicles the Vietnamese refugee experience and the course of action that her family took in the face of civil war, as well as the racism and prejudice directed at them upon arrival in the United States and the community formation that resulted from it. Her story directly corresponds to the broader historical narrative of the world and a few of the major themes of Asian American history: immigration, racism, class, and community formation.

Vietnam and its neighbors in Southeast Asia were ravaged by French colonialism with American support and the nationalist movements in opposition to it for decades, producing unrest and fissions across the nation. Communist nationalist movements sprung up around Vietnam and people around the country began to migrate southward to escape them, especially as the nation was divided into North and South Vietnam in 1954 (Lee 271). Among them was Kertcher's own mother, originally from Hanoi in the North of Vietnam, but migrated south to Saigon where she spent most of her life in Vietnam to escape the growing threat of communism. In Saigon, Kertcher's mother worked as a secretary in the Independence Palace where the president of South Vietnam resided and worked. Her first husband was a banker for Vietnam Bank, while her second was an executive banker, both highly educated by Vietnamese standards at the time (Kertcher). As a result, Kertcher described her lifestyle as protected and privileged, much more lavish than many other Vietnamese. Kertcher attended a private French school with her four sisters and knew little of the conflict destroying her country beyond the whispered conversations her mother would have on the phone. She vividly described the rumbling sounds that signified the coming of the North Vietnamese, growing loud as April approached in 1975, yet too young to understand the war that was nearing (Kertcher). Kertcher's mother had been preparing to leave Vietnam for a long time now, corresponding with a general in the Army of the

Republic of Vietnam to secure a spot on a Vietnamese naval ship and ensure the safety of her family.

Just a few days before the Fall of Saigon in the early afternoon of April 29th, Kertcher's mother received a call and her family immediately left for Saigon's port and were able to board a South Vietnamese battleship and depart for the Philippines. Just a few days later back in Vietnam, the North Vietnamese forces captured Saigon, the war ended, and Vietnam was unified under the oppressive communist regime (Kertcher). While Kertcher, her parents, and three of her four sisters were among the first refugees to make it out of Vietnam since they left before the Fall of Saigon, the United States was prepared to receive refugees en masse. American rescue efforts, refugee resettlement, and immigration services were prepared through federal agencies and policy; the State Department allowed for 125,000 Vietnamese and 5,000 Cambodian refugees to be admitted into the United States for the first wave of refugees and the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of May 1975 established resettlement programs (Lee 273).

As stated, the first wave of refugees consisted of 130,000 people, primarily those who had high levels of education, came from urban centers, had Western connections, and had connections to American and South Vietnamese government officials (Lee 274). Of course, many refugees came after this first wave in the second and third waves following the conclusion of the Vietnam War. In the late 1970s, the United States drastically increased the number of refugees that it would accept to accommodate not just Vietnamese, but Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong people who were displaced by the spillover conflict of the Vietnam War, as well as the oppressive rule of the Khmer Rouge and Pathet Lao regimes (Lee 275). The second wave was

made up primarily of poor, uneducated, and rural people who had experienced life under the communist regime and were prepared to leave at any cost (Lee 275). Kertcher explained that it became harder to leave Vietnam the longer you waited. Many of them fled to escape brutal re-education prison camps, taking whatever boats they could to leave the coast of Vietnam in search of a better home; it is this that earned the Vietnamese people the nickname of “boat people.” Lastly, the third wave of Vietnamese came much later in the 80s and 90s. Kertcher’s experiences are best identified with the first wave of the boat people.

After living on an American naval base at Subic Bay, Philippines for several days, Kertcher and her family continued their journey to the United States on an American naval warship. Despite being a part of the “educated, Westernized, urban” first wave of refugees, Kertcher and her family arrived in the United States with next to nothing (Lee 275). The United States was fully prepared for the arrival of countless thousands of Vietnamese refugees, establishing “processing camps” at Fort Pendleton, California, Fort Chafee, Arkansas, Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, and Eglin Airforce Base, Florida (Lee 275). In these processing camps, newly arrived refugees were prepared for life in the United States by receiving medical treatment, English education, and matched with sponsors that further prepared them for integration into American society (Lee 275). Kertcher and her family arrived at Camp Pendleton near San Diego, California after an arduous journey of being packed into the cargo hold of a warship for nearly two weeks and were fortunate enough to receive vaccinations, hot food, clothing, English tutoring, and more. Kertcher explained that life was tough due to the circumstances and lack of English, but they were very eager to learn and become American.

Eventually, Kertcher and her family were sponsored by a Baptist church and left Camp Pendleton for La Habra, California, where the community was predominantly white and Latinx. When confronted with the opportunity to request where her family prefers to be relocated to, Kertcher's mother quickly answered that there in Southern California they felt most comfortable, mostly due to the humid, hot weather that reminded them of their home back in Vietnam. Here, Kertcher's parents attempted to find work, but her father's education and professional experience was rendered invalid and her mother's sense of pride was shattered as she became a factory worker, working from 4:30am to 2:00pm. Kertcher described a distinct sense of humiliation that befell her parents after going from such high status in Vietnam to lower class in California, receiving hand-outs from the church sponsors. Ultimately, most people were in the same economic situation upon reaching the United States as refugees; they had little to no personal belongings, money, or things of value.

While refugees were able to give general preferences to where they wished to resettle in the United States, they tended to congregate in certain areas. For Vietnamese people, they concentrated themselves in Orange County, San Jose, and Houston (Lee 280). In fact, Orange County and the surrounding area in Southern California, where Kertcher and her family lived, boasts the largest concentration of Vietnamese people outside of Vietnam itself. Among people developed communities in the twin cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota and Fresno, California, while Cambodians congregated in Long Beach, California and Lowell, Massachusetts (Lee 280). These ethnic groups tended to stick to themselves and form their own communities due to a variety of factors, including racism, xenophobia, tending to their own cultural needs, and maintaining their ethnic identity in the predominantly white society of the United States.

Kertcher described a simultaneous intense ethnic pride in being Vietnamese and repression of that cultural identity due to the desire to assimilate and the racism thrown at her and her family members. Despite being fluent in Vietnamese, Kertcher once refused to speak anything but English. In addition, Kertcher recounted the white students who would tell her to “go back where she came from,” called her “chink” and “gook,” made slanty eye gestures, and other painful things like saying they were “stealing the jobs” or “don’t belong”. Hmong, Vietnamese, Khmer, and Lao refugees empathize with Kertcher’s experiences, sharing the same stories of xenophobia and racism (Lee 287). In order to cope with being viewed as outcasts in their new society, Asian Americans took great strides in developing their own communities for social, economic, and cultural support (Lee 97).

Kertcher vividly remembers the establishment of a Vietnamese-owned Asian market in the Orange County, California area, marking the formation of an ethnic community in which Vietnamese people could live and thrive while maintaining their cultural traditions. Even now, Vietnamese plazas and town centers continue to thrive throughout the country. Perhaps the most well-known example of ethnic community formation in the United States is the parallel experiences of Chinese-Americans and their establishment of Chinatowns. In urbanized areas with developed Chinatowns, people gathered there to “meet with co-ethnics for tea and meals, purchase familiar groceries, visit Chinese doctors, and worship in temple” (Lee 107). Vietnamese ethnic enclaves, just like the ones Kertcher described, served these same purposes for the Vietnamese community, shielded from the racism of society by their unity.

The unique experience of Shelley Kertcher offers a personal, anecdotal glimpse into the history of Asian Americans, touching upon the major common themes of Asian American

history. From her journey from Vietnam to the United States, Kertcher was faced with incredibly daunting adversity, but always persevered because there was no turning back, only looking forward. Her experiences paralleled the experiences of other Southeast Asian refugees to the United States, as well as other Asian Americans with respect to class struggle, racism directed at them from a predominantly white society, and the formation of ethnic communities in response. It is imperative that society works to preserve the narratives of people like Kertcher so that the true meanings behind history can be understood by those who study it.

## Works Cited

1. Lee, Shelley Sang-Hee. *A New History of Asian America*. New York: Routledge, 2014. Print.
2. Kertcher, Shelley. Personal interview. 24 April 2016.