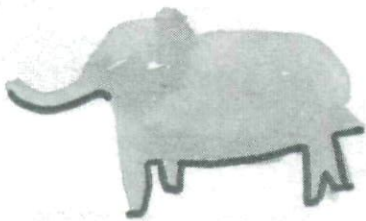


# SOCIAL WORK AND SOUTHEAST ASIANS: REFLECTIONS OF A SOCIAL WORKER, EDUCATOR, AND PRACTITIONER

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*This narrative describes the author's experiences as a Southeast Asian social worker and educator. It examines social work as a career option and explores the reasons why social work can be limiting for Southeast Asians. The author recounts the ways he uses his personal and professional backgrounds to challenge students to get past their ongoing fears about September 11<sup>th</sup> and to take on professional roles. Finally, the author reflects on student evaluations and how they influence his thinking about Southeast Asians and social work.*



On days when the weather is subzero in the Midwest, the brisk walk from the parking lot to my office is cold and uneventful. My mind is free to ponder social work and its place in academia for a Southeast Asian educator like myself. It is both funny and amazing how a young boy from a war-torn country could come to America and grow up to be a college professor. Having been appointed a tenure track assistant professorship in social work at a small Midwestern Catholic women's college, I often asked myself: What is a Vietnamese American man doing at a women's college? Many others seeing me wandering the campus those first few days undoubtedly asked themselves the same question, and for many days thereafter. On many of those days, I did not know the answer.

In August 2001, I went to Vietnam to visit my mother who was battling cancer, but I had to hurry back to the U.S. to prepare for my new teaching job. It was my first academic job and I was excited to start a new phase in my life. I was full of ideas, ready to revamp

syllabi and design exercises for the classes I was to teach.

On the morning of September 1, 2001, at around 5:00AM, I received the dreaded phone call from Vietnam. My mother had just passed away. My sister's voice on the other side actually sounded as if it was in a dream because the connection was so bad. It always happens in such a dramatic way. I hung up the phone, feeling as empty as I had felt when my father died. I was 14, an unaccompanied minor in a refugee camp on the shores of the Philippines; other Vietnamese refugees newly arrived from my hometown told me that my father had died in Vietnam. I felt then as if I had lost my sense of direction in the world.

The morning my mother died, I was alone at work because school had not started. I left a message for my Dean, telling her I needed to go to Vietnam to attend my mother's funeral and I would be back as early as I could. It was Labor Day weekend. I had missed my father's funeral twenty-three years before and I have always felt guilty about it, so I had to go to Vietnam this time. I called my brother and made the arrangements. At 4:00 P.M. that afternoon, I was en route to Vietnam.

After my mother's funeral, I was anxious to get back to the U.S. I left Vietnam on a hot September day feeling drained and empty. The first leg of the trip from Vietnam to Taipei was uneventful, and 8 hours into the 13-hour flight, I dozed off. Half asleep, I felt the plane make



a 180-degree turn, but I was too tired to care. Turbulence, I told myself. In a trance, I was dreaming of that misty place in the South China Sea where my mother was buried.

Several hours later, the Captain of China Airlines came on the intercom and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, something terrible has happened in America and we cannot land at LAX; therefore, we have been returning to Taipei and we will be landing at Chiang Kai-shek International Airport shortly." With that, everyone became extremely agitated and the plane filled with their noise. No one knew what was going on and the flight attendants were no help. What could possibly have happened in America?

We landed back in Taipei and were greeted by Taiwanese marines in full combat fatigues, carrying AK-47s. We were herded into waiting rooms at Taipei International and I saw a couple of Caucasian-Americans talking about an attack. I asked them what was happening. They said America was under attack. "America? What do you mean?" That's all they knew. They had heard it from someone else, too. There was no television at Chang Kai-shek International. Under the anxious supervision of Taiwanese airport officials and soldiers, we were given a bus ride to a dingy hotel in the far suburbs of Taipei. Those who boarded from Taiwan were free to go home, the rest of us were Vietnamese, Vietnamese-Americans, and about ten other people of various ethnicities. There we were given a choice: either take our personal belongings and passport and be on our own, or stay under the supervision of Taiwanese authorities who would get us to America as soon as they could. Many of the other people left on their own but all of the Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Americans chose to remain under the care of the Taiwanese authorities.

In the hotel room, I turned on CNN and the repeated image of the airplane plunging into the World Trade Center paralyzed me.

Chills went down my spine and I was in total panic mode. Then it was D.C., then Pennsylvania. I tried calling home and repeatedly was told that my number did not exist. I called the cell phone of a friend in Minneapolis, leaving him a message with the number of the hotel as well as asking him to check on my family. That done, I turned off the television and took a cold bath.

Sitting in the bathtub, I remembered images of Vietnam during the war. Bombs exploding, people running around shouting, crying. The sounds of thunder. It cannot happen in America! America is supposed to be one's *cho yen than cuoi cung* (the world's last safe place)! A person cannot die twice. *Nguoi chet hai lan, thit da nat tan* (Trinh, 1964). This cannot happen again in my lifetime. The strange feeling of déjà vu plunged me into extreme loneliness. I had to go see other people.

I went to the hotel lobby. There, China Airlines officials were telling the others that they would provide room and board for us for three days. What would we do after three days? No one knew. However, we were to remain inside the hotel at all times. Without our passports or entry visas, we were illegals in Taiwan. At the front door, there were two policemen keeping us from leaving the hotel. So we hung around the hotel cafeteria, drinking instant coffee and speculating. For Vietnamese-Americans, trips to Vietnam mean that you are going from one of the richest countries in the world to the poorest; therefore, we save up for a couple years, go to Vietnam to visit and be pampered, visit relatives, and when it is time to leave, whatever money we have in our pocket, we give to our relatives who come to Tan Son Nhat International to see us off. None of us had any money left! How long would it be before we could get back to the U.S.? No one knew. I had a credit card but it was no good because I needed a passport to cash money from the



bank, and we could not leave the hotel anyway.

Mr. Thanh and his wife were in their 70s, old and frail. They were going to America as tourists to visit their Vietnamese-American son in Denver. For some reason, they came to me as I sat down to breakfast; revealing their whole life story, giving me their immigration forms: I-134s, DS-156s, letters of support, in which I noticed a line: *I will give my parents \$600 a month spending money!* Yet, they said they had none for the trip to America. What were they to do? How would they be able to stay in Taiwan? There was Huong, a young, beautiful, rural woman who could not keep from sobbing violently. She was coming to America as a fiancée of an American. She showed me his picture, a young, handsome guy with lots of tattoos. Should she go back to Vietnam? She went through hell to get here; if she went back, would they let her go to America again? Soon, groups of people come over to my table, spilling their stories, trying to keep from crying through repeated clips on the oversized television hanging on the wall of the airplanes plunging themselves into the World Trade Center. Some of the men commented that it looked just like in the movies. "It is a bad movie," I thought to myself. I suddenly realized I was offering crisis management to this group of people, knowing a full-blown crisis was brewing within me, for I had not been able to contact my family in America.

By the second day, we were told we were on our own because they did not know when America was opening its borders again and the Taiwanese authorities could not take care of us any more. We were again given two choices: Stay on our own in Taiwan, or buy a one way ticket back to Vietnam. Again, groups of people hung around me, asking me for advice of what to do. My social work training did not help here for I came out with the predictable: "What do you want to do?" They answered, "You help us to decide. If we knew,

we would not ask you!" Switching modes, I told myself, "You are working with Vietnamese." I asked them, "What are your choices?" and once I heard their answer, I said, "This is what I would do if I were you." Be directive, I told myself (Lum, 2004). However, the American social worker in me tried so much to refrain from it (Hepworth, Rooney, & Larsen, 2002). Within the next three days, most of the Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Americans left for Vietnam and only a few stayed behind, including me. I was constantly questioned why I was not going to Vietnam as I had advised others to do. "I don't have the choice you do. I have to go back," I said. On September 16, the rest of the group, including Mr. and Mrs. Thanh, left with me on the first flight to America. Huong had gone back to Vietnam one day earlier as she considered it to be her only option. Most of her life had been in transit and she suddenly realized that it was better to be in transit in Vietnam rather than in Taiwan.

When we got to LAX, it looked as if it had been through a hurricane of massive proportions. Standing in long lines through immigration, I was tired and distraught. When it was my turn to show my passport, an African-American immigration officer looked at me and asked me where I had been. I replied, "In transit." He gave me a puzzled look and after a minute, he said softly, "Welcome home." His words woke me up from years of deep discontent. I had been traveling all over the world, working and vacationing abroad but never in my 20-plus years in America, had I ever heard those two words upon my return to the U.S. It was always the same stern, never-meet-the-eyes look, or just pleasantries about the weather, but never did those words come out, even during the years I worked for the U.S. government abroad. I was shocked and once he motioned for me to pass by, I hurried by so I could catch the next leg of the plane to the Midwest. Once I fastened my seatbelt,





those words came back, and like the sounds of waves coming into shore, they put me to sleep.

I came back to my academic job one week late and the social work students were all over the place. Most were scared, angry, confused, and did not know what to do. Many did not want to talk about the terrorist bombing but their faces showed it was on their minds. And their anger, unfortunately, was directed at me: I abandoned them when they needed me the most, the first day of class, on Sept. 11, 2001.

The first two classes were difficult. The students' body language told me that they were uneasy with me, but I did not know why. Having lived in the U.S. for more than two decades and trained as a professional social worker, I decided to use "I statements," which, for Vietnamese, is a rather funny way of communicating. In the third class, I addressed the class, composed of all young Caucasian females, in a way that I did not want to address them. As social workers, we are trained not to utilize professional use of self unless it benefits the clients. Here I determined that it would help my students, yet it was still hard.

I told the students that I sensed in them an apprehension toward me and I disclosed as I never had before: I was a refugee from a war-torn country, had seen a lot at the refugee camp in Southeast Asia, came into the U.S., went to school, went back to the same refugee camp to work as a social worker, and most of all, although I had been living and educated in the U.S., my mannerisms and body language that might still be very Vietnamese. If they were not sure about what I said or meant, I asked them to verify with me and promised I would do the same for them. I said all of that, and with that, I became suddenly very saddened. I really did not want to disclose all those things, since it is so emotionally draining every time. What was I looking for? Perhaps to disarm them of their

apprehension. Sentences from Peggy McIntosh's *White Privilege* (1988) came back to bring me some comfort, but they also brought uneasiness. If I were white, I would not have to disclose my background in such a way.

The students were stunned. The college they attend is a women's college and, although there were a few male professors, I was probably one of only a couple of minority male professors. Therefore, it is probably not what they expected to hear, especially from a professor. I went on: "As social workers, you will often meet clients, whether they are from the same cultural background as yours or not, about whom you cannot make assumptions and must repeatedly clarify what they mean. This is lesson one in social work practice." With that, I divided students into groups to explore similarities and differences. Most group discussions lasted but five minutes because most had "similar backgrounds" and "nothing much to say."

Yet, the collective experiences of a post 9/11 world hung in the air and since an event like this was the first for many of them, they were terrified by it. I knew I had to deal with the terrorist bombing and told myself to challenge my students to use this experience to learn about feelings of being a victim, both as Americans and non-Americans, directly or indirectly. In subsequent classes, I engaged them by telling stories about wartime Vietnam, American's involvement there, and the feelings of powerlessness of common people. I challenged them to put themselves into the shoes of people who hear bombs and gunshots nightly before they go to sleep. I pushed them to decipher news commentary, asked them to reflect on stories of people being rounded up. Finally, I led them to face the problem experienced by one group within the community by assigning them to a role-play. The role-play depicted the difficulties a Somali family living in a local section of town where there is a large concentration of



immigrants and refugees, especially from Somalia. The role-play and the instructions are described below:

"You are working as a social worker at Family Services and you were given a Somali family who came to your agency for assistance. The intake sheet indicates that they want help because their teenage children (3) are having conflict. They are a two-parent household with three kids and an older couple (grandparents) in their late 70s. The family also wants help with the older couple because they are having some difficulties with them as well as the teens. This is all the information you have and this is deliberate because it is meant for you to do the family assessment and intake process. Remember the planned change process. Ask yourself "What do I need to know to best help them?"

*In this class, each student will take a turn as the social worker working with this family from intake to termination. For the purposes of this class, an 8-week session is selected to work with the family. That means that each student will have a chance to work with the family at least once. You are welcome to lead more than once after everyone has had a chance to lead. Once you have signed up to lead the family, your job as a social worker is to do some self-educating on the cultural background, the issues involved (immigration, marital & intergenerational conflicts, role reversal, cultural sensitivity, developmental stages, are some of the issues), and how best to assist*

*the family on the goals selected. Be mindful to ensure continuity from week to week. That is, act as if you are the same social worker throughout this process. We will devote a 45-minute segment of class from Sept. 26-Nov. 14 to do this role-play. This will give you a chance to see how a case evolves from beginning to end," (Phan, 2001).*

At first, no one volunteered for the role-play. Eventually the more brave ones volunteered, then peer pressure kicked in and everyone participated because I intentionally made the family large enough for the whole class had to be involved. In subsequent sessions, I challenged them to take care of themselves and whatever issues they might have regarding the bombing during non class days so that when they are in class, they are ready to provide care and assistance for others. With that, they got into study groups, went to the library, consulted with local Somali agencies, found Somali experts learned, came back, led the group, peer-consulted, learned some more. Through that, they slowly morphed into professionals. Having worked through their fears of ignorance and presumption, and by forming new identities as collaborators, advocate, practitioner, counselor, family therapist, case manager, and hence, social workers (Collins, Jordan, & Coleman, 1999). There is empowerment in group work and through working within a group to reach a common goal, they came to realize that they can effect changes as they are learning.

The events of 9/11 proved difficult for me personally as well. Having been through so much warfare, many Vietnamese Americans are somewhat immune to violence since it was just a part of life. You hurt me, I will hurt you right back. "Just bomb the hell out of them," a friend commented. He continued, "Like



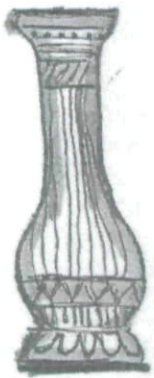
what the Americans did in North Vietnam with the Vietnamese communists!" The subsequent bombings of Afghanistan and the war in Iraq won many Vietnamese-American hearts for President Bush. During his re-election, they turned out in record numbers (Ebbert, 2005). That was to be expected since it is true that his popularity soared. What I did not expect from my circle of friends, many of whom were so peace-minded and in fact, were Buddhists, was how they could be so gung-ho about bombs and warfare. I stopped drinking coffee those days with them because I did not want to lose the few friends I had. Many had taken on the rhetoric of the day because the path of revenge is easier than the path of peace. For many of my Vietnamese-Americans friends, social justice *is* revenge.

Slowly, many of my social work students started to watch the news, listen to the radio and read the papers again. As educated members of a democracy, I challenged them: "You have to be critical of what you hear." By the end of that semester, a few who took on my challenge became eloquent speakers and could relate social work to current events; many of the rest felt left behind because they did not want to deal with the "information overload" they were getting in the news. At this juncture, I redirected them to focus on the work at hand, which was social work practice, and reminded them that social justice issues are lifelong pursuits and hoped that they would continue to be involved.

The finish of that semester was a welcome ending for my students and, to a certain extent, for me, too. I left class feeling very high that day because I felt I had been effective at helping them become more thoughtful and more critical of events, and in the process, I thought they would become better social workers. Things took a dramatic turn a couple days later, however. Once I got the course evaluations back from the school, I hurried to my office so I could read them. Most were positive about my teaching and methods, and

I glanced through those quickly. There were a couple, however, that threw me completely off. On the line that asks "If you have other comments about the class or the instructor, please write it here...", one student wrote: "He tells too many stories...", "Don't say 'damned'", and "His mannerisms are hard to understand." This last one was particularly stinging: "He does not understand Americans." I just could not believe my eyes. Slowly, a rush of sadness came over me and I walked out to the car that night in the brisk December winds, feeling angry at myself and doubting myself as a social work educator because I felt those were unfair comments as they were directed at me personally rather than at what I taught them. For almost a month, I seriously considered leaving the social work profession because I knew that I was among the few Southeast Asian social work educators and that I would always be faced with those comments, no matter what the context, and I was too thin-skinned for them. Over the next few days, I jotted down my thoughts about Southeast Asians and social work.

Once, in my first social work job in Minneapolis for a mainstream social service agency, I went on my first home visit to a client's house. Before I did, I called and made sure the client knew I was coming. Yet, when I got there and knocked on the door, my client was startled by my Asian face and she later told me that she did not expect me, an Asian, to be her social worker. She said this so matter-of-factly that I had to smile. I explained to her that I understood because there were not "many of us" around. I have since learned that when I got clients, I would send them letters introducing myself with a special emphasis on showing them how to pronounce my name ("as in Foo Manchu") and when I later called to introduce myself, I always slowed down when I came to "...Phu Phan, I am your social worker from X agency." And when I come to see my clients for the first time, I always allow a few minutes and ask





them if they have any question for me or about me that they would like to know. I learn that clients often appreciate these niceties and ask me about "where" I came from. I learn that unless these disclosures are not done early, I always feel a sense of uneasiness in my clients. I conclude that it comes with the territory.

The veil of culture is sometimes stronger than the thickest walls, however. My experiences as a social worker with Southeast Asians are full of contradictions and bring joys that often come with sadness and feelings of frustrations. For Southeast Asian clients and their families, a social worker is just a translator, literally and sometimes, culturally. This is to be expected, but it is very frustrating to me. Working in a community mental health agency that serves Southeast Asians, among others, I served as an important part of the team that included a nurse, a psychiatrist, and myself as the translator and social worker. In that capacity, I served always as the most junior member of the team, whether the others meant for that to be or not, despite the fact that I was often the one with the most information. The pecking order has always been there. However, this pecking order is often made transparent as when a Vietnamese-American client, Mrs. Y, always came into her therapy appointment with a plate of hot, crispy egg rolls. She would give it to the Caucasian psychiatrist and he would never know what to do with it, so he would give it to the nurse, and the nurse would always give it to me, saying "*Phu, please give this back to her and tell her not to give us these any more. It is sweet but she should not do it any more.*" I would give it back to her and, like a ritual, she would pretend to forget and go home only to call me when she got there asking me to put it in the "doctor's office" after giving "the nurse" some. I always got nothing! Why is it? Is it because I am Vietnamese like her that I don't need egg rolls? Maybe she thinks that I have eaten

enough egg rolls in my life that I don't need them anymore? I don't even like egg rolls, but that is annoying! Not knowing what to do with the plate, the doctor would then put it in the lunch-room with a note "please eat." Every time this happened. And it happened every week, despite everyone's protest—and delight! The professional life of an ethnic bilingual social worker is a paradoxical one. I decided to be a social worker so I could help others, especially other Southeast Asians, because they have been through so much. At the time, I took a job in an ethnic agency since I thought that these agencies are the most culturally competent. It was a small start up agency and I realized very quickly there was little chance of mobility and the salary was much less than those of my peers who went into other agencies. After a couple of years, I went to a bigger inter-ethnic agency and my chances improved somewhat, but there I was always ranked lower than others, especially Caucasians with Masters of Social Work degrees (MSW); and, if not by my peers, then almost always by my Vietnamese clients, for in their eyes, I was the equivalent of a translator. I was soon faced with the inevitable question: Do I stay here and act pretty much like a translator/worker? Or do I stay here and keep telling my clients—and my peers—that I was not the agency's interpreter? I had a Cambodian co-worker with an MSW who was so annoyed at people grabbing him for interpretive services that he recorded in his work voicemail that "You have reached the voicemail of ——— and I am NOT a translator. If you are looking for an interpreter or translator, please call..."

Of course, the aforementioned choices are not good choices. But I knew I wanted to move on. But where? Invariably, the choice is limited: Work for the county or the government, where benefits are better but where I will usually function as any other social worker, without using my bilingual skills, despite the lack of MSW-trained ethnic social



workers in the ethnic agencies. Another reason which limits my ability to go to a mainstream agency is the fact that ethnic-MSWs are deemed by mainstream private social service providers as a luxury they cannot afford. Many agency directors have told me that if I have an MSW and a bilingual in a Southeast Asian language, I should work within agencies that serve Southeast Asians. "We don't have many Southeast Asian clients; therefore, we don't have a need, even though we strive to be culturally competent..." It is often assumed that only Caucasian MSWs could work across Southeast Asian groups and not the other way around. Southeast Asian MSWs are often prevented from working cross-ethnically because of the issue of historical conflict between these groups. A Vietnamese could not work with a Cambodian, the culturally competent social work supervisor would say because "There has been too much animosity between the two groups." No matter the educational process and the MSW degree. Hence the paradox for myself and many other Southeast Asian social workers: I went to school to get the MSW so I could professionalize, but once I got it, I was confined pretty much to work with my own people or within the public sector such as county or other governmental branches. Instead of broadening one's horizon, the MSW for the Southeast Asian social worker actually restricts where he/she can go in terms of work.

The ethnic agency does not fare much better. Faced with the shortage of MSWs, its fate is usually left to those who are extremely dedicated and those novices with a good heart, usually untrained in professional social work practice. Because of limited opportunities, the ethnic agencies cannot, in many cases, hold on to the ethnic "professionals" who are trained. Am I selling out by going to the public sector? Certainly not. I am behaving as anyone would behave in a similar situation. With each Southeast

Asian entering the county for better opportunities, however, the dream dies a slow death because it is exactly in these Southeast Asian mutual aid associations that they are most needed. The dream of getting an MSW so one can serve one's group disappears as ethnic agencies are not able to provide financial and educational opportunities for these professionally trained social workers, unless each one of us starts our own social service program, which, incidentally, is happening in places like St. Paul, Minnesota, and Orange County, California, where large Southeast Asian populations congregate.

As the second generation of Southeast Asians matures and moves into the social work profession, they do not see the Southeast Asian mutual aid associations as a viable option. Factors of acculturation and professionalization will propel them to aim for mainstream agencies and their experiences as a second generation refugee/immigrant will be so different from the first generation that many will undoubtedly think it is easier just to work with mainstream clients. In subsequent years of teaching social work, I have noticed an increasing lack of interest in my few Southeast Asian social work students to work with people of their own background. This could be interpreted as a good sign that many social work students are redefining their professional identity: that they are professional social workers who happen to be Southeast Asians and not the other way around. However, that is exactly the point: due to constraints and perception within the social work profession, Southeast Asian social workers have to transform themselves. This transformation is happening because it is necessary and it is not necessarily a voluntary choice that many make. And the social work profession is becoming more limiting for them rather than opening their professional world.

Yet, it is within adversity that we find our true selves as human beings and social workers. At the end of the 2001-2002



academic year, when the sting of those evaluation comments was still strong whenever I thought about them, I learned that I was nominated for the Teacher of the Year Award. Even though I did not win, it did not matter. I do not know who nominated me, but I do know that it was someone from that first class of students that I taught. The nomination simply stated that I changed how that student looked at life. I was humbled and re-invigorated. This is why I went into social work. I entered academia probably partly because of all of the limiting options I discussed above. And in academia, I will probably continue to be bruised from time to time by those evaluation comments and it will be hard to take. Yet with each new class, I am defying stereotypes of Southeast Asians and influencing how social work is practiced. With each new relationship, I know that there is potential for both to change for the better. I do not know if Huong made it to America, but I know that Mr. and Mrs. Thanh had the time of their lives with their son in Denver, and that makes me happy. Social work makes a person patient because of delayed gratification. But delayed gratification is what makes social work meaningful and life worth living. Like hearing the words "welcome home" at LAX during those post 9/11 days. Like hearing from Mr. and Mrs. Thanh. And like learning I affected change in a student's way of thinking. Even though it was one year later.

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