

Vietnamese Immigrants and Buddhism in Southern Louisiana: Ingredients for 'Melting Pot' or for Cultural Diversity?

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Southern Louisiana has one of the largest Vietnamese refugee neighborhoods after the mid-1970s. It is impressive that one of their adaptive strategies comes from their religious lives which are centered on either Catholicism or Buddhism. The Buddhism community, especially, exhibits an exotic symbolic system of value and attitude, and thus contributes to cultural diversity in the adopted country. The landscape of the Buddhist temple is a visible symbol to them that the host society accepts their maintenance of their own cultural identity and that they are also an integral part of American society. Their making-place and being-in-place procedures, although their culture is being transformed in the original shape, put an emphasis on interacting with the host society. These procedures have been facilitated by consolidating their identity as a minority group as well as by interacting with the host society. The on-going influx of foreign immigrant groups seems not to drive them to assimilate into the melting-pot society, but to contribute to the increase in the cultural diversity of the United States.

Key Words: Vietnamese immigrants, multiculturalism, ethnic minority, ethnic identity, adaptive strategy.

1. Introduction

Since 1975 several waves of Vietnamese mass immigration to the United States have occurred. Vietnamese Americans became the third largest population among Asian American groups in 1991, approximating 850,000 (Hing, 1993, pp. 121-138). Noticeable is that the Vietnamese Americans came to the United States mostly through the refugee or boat people category, which is tied up with the fact of her involvement in the civil war of Vietnam. In this regard, their mass immigration took place within a brief span and the reaction of the host society was quite complex. The process and impact of the population movements on the culture of the host

country has sparked interest among various social scientists. Most of the work, however, treats the Vietnamese as just one of many ethnic groups living in the host country. The majority's point of view from outside took up the mainstream of the work. Few endeavors have attempted to present the Vietnamese view of how they have come to be ethnic Americans, rather than so-called 'One-Hundred Percent Americans,' or to examine what motivates them "to make" and "to be in" their own places.

The Vietnamese refugee immigrants in the United States began their lives in more difficult conditions than many other ethnic groups (Freeman, 1989; Rutledge, 1992). Within two decades, however, they have remarkably

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transcended the trauma of their miserable condition and made fast social and economic progress without losing their identity. Their religion, perhaps more than any other factor, has enabled them to maintain their identity. Their religious convictions help them to confront harsh conditions in the adopted country and offer them mental consolation. Vietnamese Americans' religion is divided broadly into two categories: Buddhism and Roman Catholicism. Although two religions keep the balance between Vietnamese minorities here in the United States, more than half of Vietnamese living in their home country believe in Buddhism.¹¹ It should offer a real exotic cultural factor to the host society where Occidentals from the European continent consist of the majority.

This paper deals with the life and adaptive process of Vietnamese Buddhist immigrants by the ethnographic method, mainly focusing on how they have experienced and perceived their new society and place. The relationship between the social environment and the cultural identification in their place is examined. The strategies they adopted in relation to settling-down procedures were recorded and analyzed.

Fieldwork at the Buddhist temple, which is located in the city of Gonzalez bordering on the city of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was done on six Sundays from September to November, 1992. Observations of the worship were made on Sunday mornings, followed by interviews held with a dozen informants who could speak English. Interviews were open-ended and informal, which put them at ease with a strange ethnographer. This paper made an effort to stand upon the 'who's' point of view out there, but some portions were inevitably influenced by the ethnographer's own knowledge and other existing information on Vietnamese minority people. Fieldwork was conducted only at the Buddhist temple, and unfortunately, observations and interviews at the place of their secular life were not made.

2. Ethnicity Resilient: Multiculturalism

In association with an immigrant group's transformation of its status into a permanent

resident group and its establishment of an identification in a new land, the process of adaptation to the changing social environment has been one of the most important subjects in the study of urban ethnic relations. The wide variety of adaptive strategies among ethnic groups have enabled various kinds of symbolic metaphors to be presented: "melting-pot," "mosaic," "salad bowl," "rainbow," "symphony," "kaleidoscope," etc. (Fuchs, 1990, p. 276). None of them by themselves, however, are likely to speak squarely to the complexity of ethnic dynamics in the United States.

As a society constituted of immigrants, the United States has long embraced assimilationism as the unofficial national doctrine, but ethnic cultural diversity continues to stand out, partly due to an on-going influx of immigrants. In many cases, some groups have been highly resistant to Americanization and thus ethnic identity has persisted over even the third or fourth generation (Conzen, et al., 1992). Despite the creed of assimilation, it is recognized that American society is obviously composed of many ethnic sub-societies, and to the ethnic minority members, their own distinct subculture itself has constantly played as the strategic resource in adapting to the new world full of competition (Breton, 1990). In this context, many minorities seek to maintain their cultural identity, and at the same time they try to participate in the various mainstream institutions.

The most simple, but hardly verifiable, approach to explain the retention of ethnicity is the primordialists' view that ethnic groups are intuitively bounded by shared ancestry and culture. Members are enabled to have a perception of community, and thereby satisfy the human essential need for "belonging" (Geertz, 1963). According to anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1963, p. 109), ethnicity is defined as a primordial attachment that is an ineffable "givens" stemming from being born into a particular social pattern. In his definition, ethnicity is a conception naturally or biologically defined rather than socially defined. That is, primordial attachment is a kind of superorganic or given entity outside of individuals, and an

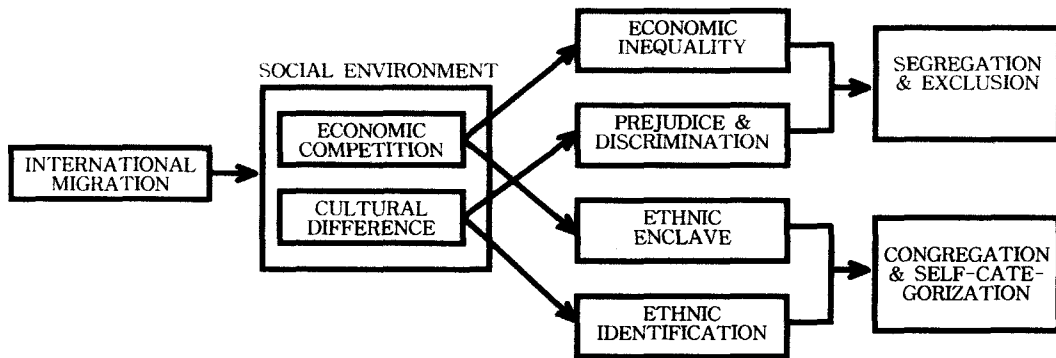


Figure 1. A Model of Multiculturalism

entity created prior to their interactions (Eller and Coughlan, 1993).

The other approach to explain ethnicity resilient is that ethnic ties are sustained and reproduced by rational interests (Olzak, 1986; Bonacich and Model, 1980; Yancey, et al., 1976; Glazer and Moynihan, 1963). In other words, ethnic groups are conceived as interest groups, and to them ethnicity functions as an instrumental or situational means for mobilizing power. It contrasts sharply to primordialism wherein ethnicity is regarded as an end in itself or making its own dynamic. When socio-economic competition for resources becomes intense in the immigrants' destination, the ethnic groups attempt to organize and consolidate the ethnic identity in order to cope with the outer competitive environment. The collective action is not only taken by the host group toward the new minority groups to secure the scarce resources, but also the subordinate ethnic group actively mobilizes its people to effectively adjust to the harsh environment of unequal power distribution and the ensuing structural discrimination.

A typical explanatory framework for this confrontational ethnic relationship is the "split labor market theory" (Bonacich, 1972; Peck, 1989; Schreuder, 1990). This theory asserts that the occupations of modern society are divided into primary and secondary labor market sectors, and the ethnic characteristics of workers function as major determining influences in their admission to each sector. More specifically, power-holding groups take the most desirable

occupations, whereas powerless immigrant minorities are confined into less prestigious and low-paid secondary labor market jobs.

The split labor market is generally sub-divided into smaller segmentations by ethnic lines effected by the information flow in ethnic social networks and the consequent chain migration (Schreuder, 1990). The ethnicization by the multiple dimensions of ethnic segmentation apparently reduces contacts between ethnic groups and brings about an intensification of ethnic organizations inside an ethnic group. Mutual inter-ethnic rejection results in in-group solidarity which provides members of the immigrant group with moral support and sometimes economic and political power (Yancey, et al., 1976; Steinberg, 1981).

From this perspective, ethnicity is an emergent phenomenon, not a given fact of social life beyond the realm of human agency. It is seen as an explicit response to a specific social context rather than as an inherent characteristic of any social grouping. The character and strength of ethnicity varies place by place because specific historical conditions or contingencies impinges on how it emerges, and grows (Yancey, et al., 1976). Ethnic groups in modern settings continue to recreate themselves,³ and thus ethnicity is continuously being reinvented in response to changing realities both within the group and the host society (Conzen, et al., 1992). Therefore, ethnicity should be understood and examined in the process of contextuality in a place as a historically contingent phenomenon. In the invention of ethnicity, however, human

beings are not likely to be passive recipients merely affected by the constraints of particular historical contexts, but rather active agents making or selecting among various strategies for adaptation.

The on-going supply of foreign immigrants and the retention or even strengthening of ethnic identity among ethnic groups have made the United States a society of "ethnic pluralism." Presently "multiculturalism" has become the preferred term for such a condition. "Multiculturalism" probably became prevalent in the general public after the Canadian government proclaimed it as an official policy in 1971, and in the United States, a "multicultural" curriculum was first proposed for the New York schools in 1990 (Gleason, 1992, p. 48). In the Canadian policy, all groups are encouraged to maintain their distinctive cultural heritages and all group members are recognized as having equal rights (Kobayashi, 1993). In reality, however, multiculturalism remains an ideal. That is, two forms of multiculturalism could be differentiated based on how power is distributed: equalitarian pluralism and unequalitarian pluralism (Marger, 1991, pp. 130-142). In the society of equalitarian pluralism, ethnic groups are allowed to retain their cultural distinctiveness and equally participate in a common political and economic system. In a society of unequal pluralism, ethnic groups have unequal political and economic power distributed, and are socially or spatially segregated. The question of the maintenance or celebration of distinctive ethnic cultural heritages becomes secondary. Presumably, equalitarian ethnic multiculturalism on the way toward Americanization has become the societal objective of the United States.

3. Process of Immigration to the U. S.

Vietnamese immigrants are reported as an ethnic group which has flowed into the United States on the largest scale in the shortest time. Previously, they had gone through a long history of hardship, although intermittent, under the rule of the Chinese, French and Japanese imperial regimes until the mid-twentieth century. Thereafter, the tragedy of the civil war and the

national liberation struggle convulsed their homeland, and meanwhile, huge numbers of refugees have continued to drift out of the ascetic land toward the land of peace (Chan, 1991, pp. 152-165). Their long history of hardship is far from over even in the countries of freedom and opportunity, including the United States.

According to Haines (1985), four types of refugees have come out of Vietnam: The first-wave refugees; the second-wave refugees; the escapees; and the orderly departures.

The first-wave refugees left the country during the spring of 1975 as Communist forces advanced toward Saigon and the United States began to airlift its non-essential employees out of Vietnam. The approximately 130,000 Vietnamese got out of their home country as the first-wave refugees. The refugees were housed at resettlement camps of four military bases in the States: Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, and Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania. They were soon matched with sponsors throughout the country, and thus widely spread out over the whole United States. The reason is that the government tried to minimize the new people's concentration in a certain area (Gordon, 1987). They were mainly made up of Vietnamese dependents of U. S. service-members and high-ranking military officers and officials of the South Vietnamese government. Also, many were people who worked for foreign companies. They were included in the elite class, and thus they were already so familiar with urban life and had some command of English that they could adjust to the new environment with relative ease (Locke, 1992, pp. 97-98; Lee, 1990, p. 1)

Two recollections by Thich Tri Chon, the Buddhist monk of the temple, and Mr. Wing, the president of the Vietnamese Buddhist Society of the Baton Rouge area, show the agony of the decision-making in escaping their home country as well-educated and highly-classed first-wave refugees.

Thich Tri Chon³: "I had studied Buddhism in India in my early twenties and became a monk in

South Vietnam. I had been one of the promising and influential Buddhist leaders in South Vietnam until the country was taken over by the Communist regime. I still have some power of the Vietnamese Buddhist society here in the United States. I came over to the new land with the first wave of Vietnamese immigrants in 1975 for fear that the new Communist government would bring pressure upon Buddhism. In fact, I protested the misgovernment of both communist and democratic regimes, and therefore was not welcomed by either part. After arriving here, I tried to give mental consolation to the Vietnamese refugees taken to Camp Pendleton, California. Especially, I did my best to take care of young Vietnamese boys having families left back in their home country. I still work for them to lessen their social deviance and to unite them with their families."

Mr. Wing⁴: "I came over here in 1975, when I had just gone back to my home country, South Vietnam, after finishing my study in China and Japan. I was a highly educated person in Vietnam and was very confident of a new life in even a strange land. Unfortunately, however, I was not recognized as an able man who would be able to engage in a high skilled job, at the time of arriving here. I felt that I was blocked from social upward movement. I did not forget the mental anguish at that time. Now I am working in the revenue section for the Louisiana State Government. So I achieved a lot due to my enduring effort for the last fifteen years. But my job is confined to my own community, helping my comrades to understand the American tax regulations. Further achievement is clearly limited."

The second-wave refugees left Vietnam during the 1978-79 period when the Sino-Vietnamese conflict became intensified. The Vietnamese Communist regime exerted pressure upon the businesses run by the Chinese minority, closed Chinese schools, and eventually forced them to leave the country. The long-standing Vietnamese resentment against this Chinese minority group turned to outright persecution when China became Vietnam's adversary in the war with

Cambodia in 1978 (Chan, 1991, pp. 152-165). Thus, the second-wave refugees predominantly consisted of ethnic Chinese. The following statement by a Vietnamese college student gives some understanding of the situation which surrounded the Chinese Vietnamese in the turning period of 1980.

Mr. Hoy⁵: "I and my family arrived in this country in 1980 to avoid the hardship imposed by the communist regime. My grandfather had moved down from Southern China to Northern Vietnam in the early twentieth century and then lived there as Chinese minority people. My family had so succeeded in the finance business in Vietnam as to live in opulence. My family, however, had been subjected to suppression by the communist government of Vietnam, which had begun to conduct a war with China. At the age of eleven, I got on a small boat with my family and neighbors. A few of my friends, unfortunately, left their families behind when they came and still try to get in touch with their families living in Vietnam."

The escapees were different from the other categories in that they made a carefully thought-out plan to leave the country in order to get out of the economic plight of their homeland. They pooled resources to buy boats and gasoline for their trip for quite a long time and left clandestinely. This outflow occurred throughout the 1980s. The Refugee Act of 1980, which reduced entry restrictions for Vietnamese refugees of boat-people, was passed. 1980 witnessed the peak of new arrivals, amounting to 95,000, and between 1978 and 1982, about 280,000 Vietnamese people rushed into the country (Gall, 1995, p. 166). Richardson (1979) has estimated that half of the boat people were killed at the ocean wind and waves. And, also, most of the survivors experienced the bitterness of being looted and raped by brutal pirates and other predators.

Ms. Nguen⁶: "I felt terrible and sorry whenever I looked back on the bitter experience on the crowded boat. We, thirty five relatives and neighbors, got on a small boat and left a swamp near Saigon deep on a summer night. We

went and went to the Ocean to expect any western big ship to find and rescue us. But nobody was there except the hot sun and horrible sharks. Several days later, we were finally happy to see a big wooden ship, and tried to be noticed. The ship approached us. But they rushed into us and robbed us of everything valuable in our ship. We could not but drift again to the ocean. We had no food any more. One by one people starved to death and we should dump them into the sea. My grandfather did, too. My deep sorrow still gives me a pain."

The orderly departures enabled the families tied with people already living abroad to leave Vietnam. It was the result of the 1979 Memorandum of Understanding between Vietnam and the U. N. High Commissioner for Refugees, with the endorsement of all resettlement countries, including the United

States. This program allowed about 66,000 Vietnamese immigrants to arrive in the United States between 1983 and 1991 (Hing, 1993, pp. 123-132).

Most of the Vietnamese refugees except for the first category, were from rural areas and uneducated (Wong, 1986). They managed to survive the traumas of war, the terrors on the sea, and the cultural clash in an alien society. To make matters worse, they spoke little English, and had few occupational skills, making their adjustment and attainment of economic self-sufficiency more difficult in the new land.

4. Life Space: Southern Louisiana, Baton Rouge, Buddhist Temple

Southern Louisiana has developed one of the largest Vietnamese refugee communities since the mid-1970s. The 1990 federal census of

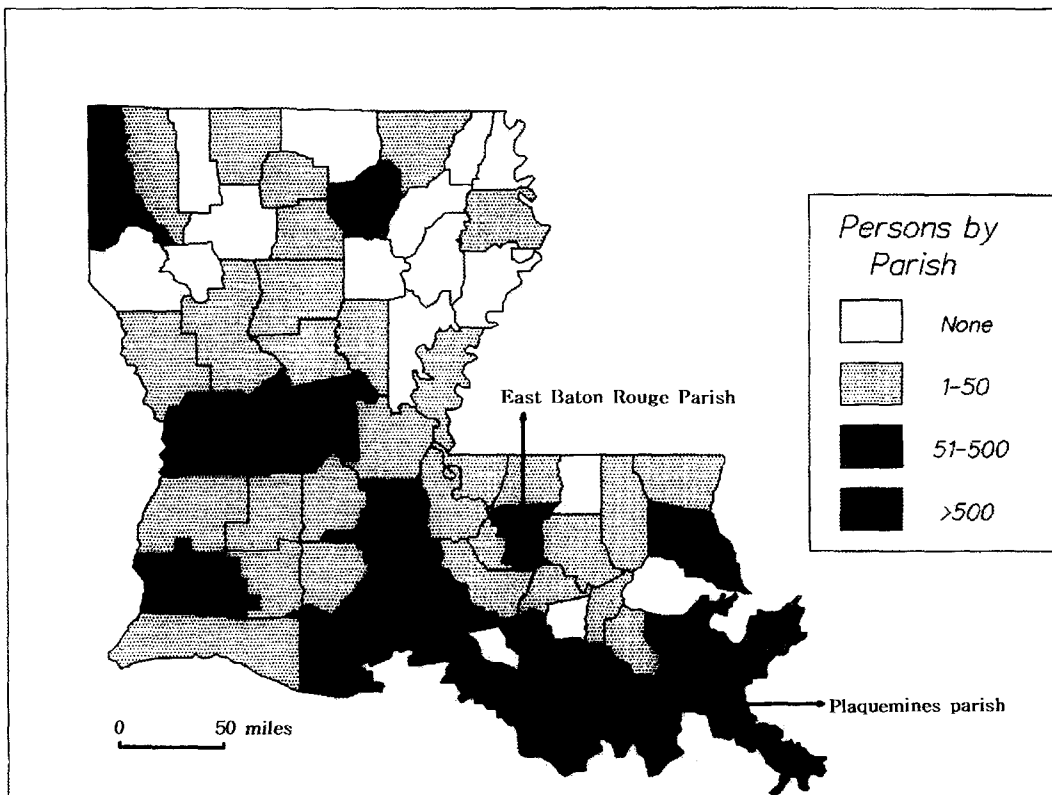


Figure 2. Vietnamese People in Louisiana (1990)

Table 1. Number of Population by Major Asian Groups

Ethnic Origin	1980		1990	
	U. S.	Louisiana	U. S.	Louisiana
Chinese	812,178	3,298	1,645,472	5,430
Filipino	781,894	2,614	1,406,770	3,731
Japanese	716,331	1,482	847,562	1,526
Asian Indian	387,223	2,873	815,447	5,083
Korean	357,393	1,729	798,849	2,750
Vietnamese	245,025	10,884	614,547	17,598
Total	3,300,044	22,880	6,128,647	36,118

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991, 1981; Gall(ed.), 1993.

population indicates that the Vietnamese ethnic group has become the largest foreign-born group in Louisiana. The Vietnamese ethnic population made up almost half of the Asian American population in Louisiana both in 1980 and 1990. Especially, the port of New Orleans, the largest city in Louisiana, has had the largest congregation of Vietnamese since 1975.

Anthropologist, Emily Lee (1990, pp. 2-3) observed that they were attracted to Southern Louisiana by the pleasant climate, comparable to that in coastal Vietnam, and by the active role the United Catholic Churches played in the resettlement of Vietnamese in Louisiana. That is, the large Catholic population and its active support pulled the large Vietnamese Catholic population at the initial stage. As described above, the first-wave of Vietnamese were already acquainted with the urban and westernized life style and influenced by Catholicism since the French colonial period.

It seemed after the 1980s that the Vietnamese Buddhist group began to considerably increase in number. This time coincided with the period of increasing Buddhist temples here in the United States. The second-wave people which was made up of the under-educated, rural Vietnamese and the Sino-Vietnamese, seem to have been predominantly attached to Buddhism, their traditional religion. The Vietnamese Buddhists of the Baton Rouge area were raising a fund to erect a Buddhist temple for about three years, and eventually succeeded in the great project in 1983 in Gonzalez just outside the city boundary of Baton Rouge. The name of the

temple is CHUA TU-BI(慈悲寺). It literally means 'mercy.'

The concentration of Vietnamese population in Southern Louisiana also partly resulted from their strong traditional value of extended family and family support. According to the 1985 population report, 55% of Vietnamese American households consisted of extended families under which more than three generations lived together, while 38% consisted of nuclear families, and 7% lived with non-relatives (Gall, 1995, p. 168).

Mr. Wing: "When confined to the refugee camp of Fort Chaffe, Arkansas, I was happy to know that my cousin's families also got out of Saigon and were in Camp Pendleton, California. But we should get a sponsor to live in this country, and thus came to Baton Rouge under the direction of the United Catholic Church. Actually, I am not a Christian, but was mixed with my friends of Roman Catholic. After a year in Baton Rouge, I invited my cousin's families who lived in Los Angeles. He worked as a construction worker, but was looking for a new small business. So they came over here to start a grocery shop in the black community of Northern Baton Rouge. Of course, I helped them to find the place and to loan them some money from the Vietnamese community in Baton Rouge."

The U. S. government aimed at dispersing the Vietnamese refugees throughout the country to minimize cultural and economic clashes to the host society (Gordon, 1987). The government

certainly viewed the spatial decentralization of an immigrant group as the basis of assimilation to the American culture. After released from refugee camps and settling down in a new land under the auspices of sponsors, however, many Vietnamese people began to re-migrate to the place where their families and relatives were living. Besides, the secondary migration of Vietnamese immigrants was motivated by the high public assistance benefit level, lenient public assistance eligibility requirements, large Asian communities, mild winters, and low unemployment rates of some states (Desbarats, 1985).

The Vietnamese population has been densely distributed in the urban areas and the coastal parishes in Louisiana (See Figure 2). It is interesting that the large Vietnamese population resides in the coastal area to engage in fishery and fishery-related industry. For example, Plaquemines parish beside the port of New Orleans had had only seven Vietnamese residents in 1980, but abruptly increased to three hundred fifty six residents in 1990. It shows the second wave refugee had a great influence on the increase of population in that area. According to the population census in 1990, among the total Vietnamese population of 17,593 in Louisiana, more than 80% (14,345) of them were living in the New Orleans area and the coastal parishes facing the Mexican Gulf.

Many of them seem to have been in charge of the same kind of work in their home country. This fishery population was abruptly increased after the second influx in 1980. They had no other skills to adjust to the new environment of the United States, while the Gulf area provided valuable resources for the people. Also, the ethnic concentration has been beneficial, not only to economic adaptation, but also to psychological adjustment. Ethnic networks have provided information and assistance for livelihood to the constituents. They worked more harder than in the homeland, and the overwork, sometimes, inflamed the existing shrimpers' hostile feeling into the armed conflicts.

5. Buddhism as Adaptive Strategy

The Buddhist temple, CHUA TU-BI, is located just outside East Baton Rouge Parish. A thirty-minute drive down the Airline Highway got the ethnographer to the temple. However, it was really hard to find the temple because it was hidden deep inside a willow forest separated from neighbors. Even the nearest gas station half a mile away from the temple did not know its location. The area was said to be first reclaimed by the Vietnamese architects who built the temple a decade ago. There is no sign of the road name and also the road is not paved. Furthermore, telephone information said the phone number was private. It really evoked such a serene atmosphere that it made the ethnographer tense.

Vietnamese Buddhism is basically close to Mahayana Buddhism, or the Greater Vehicle, like that in East Asia, rather than Theravada, or the Lesser Vehicle (Vidulich, 1994). Vietnamese Buddhism has been less readily accepted by the Anglo-Saxon host culture than Roman Catholicism. But now it has spread more and more inside as well as outside of the Vietnamese community.

Thich Tri Chon: "As a Buddhist monk from Vietnam, I have experienced difficulties in managing the congregation and in persuading Christians of other races to admit Vietnamese Buddhism. Vietnamese people had to work hard to survive the new environment so that they were quite a bit negligent of their religious life during their first period in the 1970s. However, as they have become more secure in their livelihoods, more and more people have returned to their traditional religion, Buddhism. At first, it was not so easy for Buddhist refugees to get any supporting organization for their settlement in this new home country. In my opinion, it was due to the prejudice of the host society of the European Christianity group. I saw many of the Vietnamese Buddhists in refugee camps seemingly convert to Christianity in order to obtain a sponsor. I understand the severe situation made them do it. The Buddhist people

arriving in the first stage had a hard time to get the permission to erect a temple. Sometimes, there were demonstrations by American Christian people who regarded Buddhism as an idol worship religion. This sort of problem, however, is going away and Buddhism has little by little spread even into the white people of the host society.”

In the remarks above, we can find the host society gradually tolerating the exotic religion. As of 1991, there were 80 Vietnamese Buddhist temples across the United States (Gall, 1995, p. 169)

The temple is composed of several separate buildings centering around the main building; the management building, statues of god symbolizing good, a statue of god managing evil, the pagoda, and a building for meditation rooms. The main building can be entered by several stairs in the middle of the facade. The right and left part of the facade has the inscription of ‘the Noble Eightfold Path’ as follows; Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Awareness, Right Concentration. The Noble Eightfold Path is one of the Buddha’s teachings, which is represented as a doctor’s diagnosis of the impermanent and unsatisfactory condition of people in this world. (Morgan, 1985, pp. 7-9.) The world view based on the Buddha’s teachings is well revealed by the remark of an interview as follows;

Mr. Wing: “This world is just a harsh field filled with hardship and adversity. Really hard one. All problems are caused by the individuals’ desire and hatred. All unrest, all conflicts, all disturbances are first formed in our mind. Therefore, to solve the problems is up to the individuals’ constant effort to control them. That is, in order to have peace for each of us, there must be peace in each of us. Peace in one’s self is something hard to achieve but it can be achieved if we are willing to learn the way and it is certainly worth our efforts to apply it. If someone would reach the stage of deliverance of one’s soul, this world is the same place as heaven to him. Unfortunately, however, only one person reached the stage so far, and that was

Buddha. We, the people, should try to practice virtue during our life time with reference to Buddha’s great teaching.”

The emotional distress of the Vietnamese immigrants has been caused by the tragic war in their home land and the cultural clash in the adopted land. Their view of life following Buddha’s philosophy helps them to cope with the emotional distress.

There is a big image of Buddha seated on the top of the two-story altar down inside the room of the main building. On the lower story of the altar, an incense-bowl, flowers, and candlestands are evenly placed. To the left of the altar, several dozens of photos of respected meditation masters are exhibited. All of them were black and white photos which seem to have been brought from Vietnam. The walls of the room are richly decorated with pictures of famous Buddha images. There are lots of low tables placed inside the room, on which Buddhist scriptures are put. People offer a mass kneeling down on the floor.

The mass in this temple begins with the national anthems of the former South Vietnam and then the United States. After the national anthems holy music which may invite everybody’s solemnity, is heard. The mass is dominantly covered by chanting a spell. A monk initiates it and then is followed by the members. The monk intermittently exchanges incense with great care. After about thirty minutes of chanting a spell, they have the time of meditation that might be the most critical part of the ceremony. That is the procedure of their mass. It is a quite simple ceremony compared to other religions. The multinational or multicultural appearance of the religious ceremony is found quite intentionally designed in the following remarks by an interviewee.

Mr. Tiu”: “I am living in the United States, a land of opportunity, not in Vietnam. I am thankful that this country allowed us to live here. But I can’t give up my religion, Buddhism, which my ancestors and families believed in. At first, I could not but hide my religion to show my willingness to mix together with black and white people. You know, there are few orientals in Louisiana. After erecting this Buddhist

temple, we invited American people living around the temple. This temple is not only for Vietnamese people. Actually, we have several Laotians and Thais. We have no white or black Americans on the list, but I know some guys are much interested in Buddhist philosophy. Now I'm proud of talking with American friends about Buddha's teachings. More important is how to get peace of mind in the ceremony rather than the format of the ceremony. We are ready to be more flexible."

In fact, this kind of big ceremony is held only four times a year which fall on the days of the lunar new year (January 1 by lunar calendar), the year's first full moon day (January 15 by lunar calendar), Buddha's birthday (April 8 by lunar calendar), Oriental Thanksgiving day (August 15 by lunar calendar). Because the temple, CHUA TU-BI, has no permanent resident monk, it invites a monk on those days from Los Angeles which has the headquarters of Vietnamese Buddhism. On the other Sundays, it has no official ceremony, although some individuals come to have the time of meditation by themselves.

The temple gives an important meaning to the Vietnamese people, but a generational difference in attitude to the temple exists. Vietnamese culture puts the most emphasis on family loyalty, especially to the harmony of the immediate family called "*nha*." The importance of family is well expressed in their proverb, "A drop of blood is better than an ocean of water" (Gall, 1995, p. 168). Religion has played a role in consolidating family ties, which seem to be weakened in the adopted country.

Mr. Lay⁸¹: "The Buddhist temple, to me, is the place where I occasionally go to reflect on my past and future. Because it was more important to make a plan for the future, I put bigger stress on my actual life rather than on the religious life. That is why I am negligent in frequenting the temple, even if my parents earnestly persuade me to go there. Nevertheless, on the lunar new year day, *Tet*," I certainly participate in the big celebration held at the temple. Before coming here, I used to take a cleansing bath. *Tet* is a way

of recognizing myself as a Vietnamese American, not as an old Vietnamese or as "one hundred percent American." It is a really important event to show ourselves and our differences to the outside world."

It must be a greatest religious ceremony, and also seems to be a major celebration which draws together the old and the new worlds of the refugees. The celebration is an extrapolation from their parents' background and a clear vision for their future in this place. It appears to be a symbolization of how they came to be and how they interpret their position in this new world.

6. Conclusion: Being-in and Making Place

Fundamental to the existence of Vietnamese minority people are place and culture. The places of Southern Louisiana, Baton Rouge, and the Buddhist temple, CHUA TU-BI, offer them a sort of material setting which functions as a stage and a text. Their making-place and being-in-place procedure, although their culture is being transformed in the original shape, puts an emphasis on interacting with the host society. But moreover, it is through these procedures that they consolidate their identity as a minority group.

The Buddhist temple in Gonzales, Louisiana, is designed and established for the sole purpose of helping people to achieve inner peace and to find happiness. Buddhism, which ascribes the cause of all suffering to man's desire, of course including desire for wealth, seeks for spiritual affluence through intuitive thought and emphasizes individual introspection. The Buddhist value is not well matched with the American dominant value of working hard for material affluence influenced by Protestantism. Thus, in this regard, it is hard to reconcile these aims with those of the host society.

This religious characteristic of Vietnamese Buddhism has been recreated here in the new environment so that it functions as their adaptive strategy. Buddhism was obliged to accommodate the American value of working hard for economic success. Vietnamese Buddhists have thought it is the only way to get out of socio-

economic discrimination. They believe that moving-up on the ladder of the socio-economic class can be attained by diligent work for material affluence. The Buddhist temple offers them a place where they can soothe their mental fatigue. It is less a place where they cultivate Buddhist moral concepts such as non-attainment, egolessness, impermanence, and nirvana (annihilation from personal existence). The "spiritual affluence" of Buddhism has become strategically mixed with the value of the host society. It therefore contributes to their adjustment to the changing reality.

Of course, the Buddhist temple has played an important role in assisting one another, and thus confirming their identity. It is a visible symbol to them that the host society accepted their maintenance of their own cultural identity and thus they are an integral part of American society. As the status of majority in their homeland was reduced into the status of minority, they had to learn the way to live as minority. Buddhism is offering them "the way."

Notes

- 1) International statistics in 1990 read Buddhists consist of 55% of all population living in Vietnam. Population of Roman Catholic is no more than 7% of the total population of Vietnam. On the contrary, Roman Catholicism is disproportionately represented among the Vietnamese refugees in the United States. It was roughly estimated that 30 to 40 percent of the refugee people believed in Roman Catholicism.
- 2) The recreation process of identity takes place irrespective of majority or minority groups. A noticeable research on the ethnicity mobilization by power-holding groups was done by sociologist Richard Alba (1990). He argues that various European ethnic groups are being currently blended into one large white ethnic group through the making of a new integrated identity. In addition to the processes of acculturation and intermarriage, he maintains, self-defining processes of ethnicization are responsible for the invention of an acquired sense of belonging which are greatly influenced by confrontation with the non-white immigrant group.
- 3) It was a real fortune that the ethnographer could meet a Buddhist monk, Thich Tri Chon at the Buddhist temple. The monk used to be invited to this temple only four times a year, and the ethnographer met him on the temple's *Tet* ceremony. The monk had just arrived at New Orleans Airport one day before and had to leave to go to the other temples of Florida by bus as soon as finishing the *Tet* ritual and party in the temple.
- 4) Mr. Wing is the president of the Vietnamese Buddhist Society of the Baton Rouge Area which consists of around 300 people. He is working for the State Government of Louisiana and assisting their comrades of poor English to settle down in Louisiana.
- 5) Mr. Hoy is an undergraduate part-time student majoring in electrical engineering at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. From last summer, he has been working at the Gulf States Utilities Company. Although he did not frequently show up at the temple, the ethnographer met him on the LSU campus.
- 6) She runs a beauty shop in Baton Rouge. The shop serves mainly Vietnamese people. Her family is considering moving to Houston, Texas, where her son got a job. She also said there were lots of blood relatives living there.
- 7) Mr. Tiu is working at a grocery shop mainly catering to black neighbors in northern Baton Rouge. He has no blood relatives in the U. S. and tried to bring his old parents, brothers, and sisters still living in Vietnam to Baton Rouge.
- 8) Mr. Lay is working at the VINH PHAT, an Oriental grocery shop, with his extended family. But he is trying to open his own liquor shop in a coastal town at Louisiana. He said he has no problem to gather some money to open it because the members of his extended family are willing to lend the money.
- 9) *Tet* is the first day of the first month of the lunar calendar, usually between January 19 and February 20. It is regarded as the most important celebration to Vietnamese refugees. In Vietnam, *Tet* is said to be a time for paying debts, correcting one's faults, forgiving the errors of others, putting past difficulties beyond you, and making new friends out of old adversaries. (Rutledge, 1992, pp. 136-138)

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남부루이지애나의 베트남 移民集團과 佛教: 鎔鑛爐 속의 成分? 혹은 文化的 多樣性的 成分?

이 영 민*

1975년 베트남 공산화 이후 본격적으로 이루어진 베트남인들의 미국 이민은 매우 짧은 기간동안 대규모로 진행되어 1991년 현재, 약 850,000명에 이르고 있다. 그들의 다문화사회로의 인구이동과 문화적 적응의

문제는 그 동안 사회과학계의 쟁점으로 부상하여 적지 않은 연구들이 이루어 졌다. 그러나 대부분의 연구들은 베트남 이민집단을 단순히 미국 다문화사회의 여러 민족집단들 중 하나의 하위민족으로, 즉 주류집단의 관점에

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서 다루고 있다. 어떻게 하위민족으로서 미국사회에 편입되고 있는가?, 어떻게 새로운 장소에 정착하고 그 장소를 고유하게 창조해 나가고 있는가? 등의 문제를 베트남인 자신의 입장에서 개진한 연구는 매우 적은 실정이다. 본 연구는 미국 루이지애나주 배튼루즈시 근교의 베트남 불교사원 신도들의 생활과 적응전략을, 즉 새로운 장소에서의 사회환경과 문화적 정체성 형성과정과의 관계를 민족지적 연구방법을 통하여 다루고 있다. 참여관찰과 인터뷰는 1992년 9월부터 11월 사이에 실시되었다.

남부루이지애나, 배튼루즈시, 그리고 불교사원, Chua Tu-Bi(慈悲寺)는 베트남 이민집단과 주류문화집단과의 상호교류의 장으로서 일종의 공간적 텍스트이다. 불교사원은 베트남인들의 내적 평화를 연마하는 종교적 목적을 달성키 위해 그들 자신들의 손으로 건조되었다. 현세의 모든 고통을 부의 추구하고 같은 인간 자신의 욕망에 기인하는 것으로 간주하는 불교이념은 직관적 사고와 자기성찰을 통한 정신적 풍요를 추구한다. 이러한 불교의 가치는 프로테스탄트 이념에 바탕을 둔, 물질적 풍요를 위한 근로정신을 강조하는 미국적 가치와 어긋난다.

이러한 베트남 불교의 종교적 특징은 변화된 새로운 환경에서 재창조되어 오히려 그들의 적응전략으로서 기능한다. 사회, 경제적 차별을 극복하기 위해 그들은 경제적 부의 축적을 통한 계층상승만이 최선의 방법이라고 생각하고 있다. 불교사원은 그들이 불

교이념을 연마하는 장소이기도 하지만, 동시에 현실세계에서 주류집단의 이념을 따르면서 겪게되는 정신적 피로를 위로 받는 장소이기도 하다. 불교의 정신적 풍요라는 가치가 주류사회의 가치와 전략적으로 혼합되어 변화된 현실에의 적응에 공헌을 하고 있는 것이다. 그러나 더욱 중요한 것은 불교를 통한 동족집단의 결속망이 이중노동시장이라는 미국사회의 불평등한 경제 구조를 극복할 수 있는 기반을 제공하고 있다는 점이다. 주류집단의 외부적 범주화에 의한 격리(segregation)를 그들은 내부적 범주화를 통한 응집(congregation)으로 승화시켜 계층상승의 도약대로 삼고 있다.

불교사원은 베트남 이민자들간의 상호 결속을 도모함으로써 그들의 정체성을 공고하게 해주는 역할을 하고 있다. 또한 불교사원은 주류집단이 자신들의 문화적 정체성을 인정하고 있고, 따라서 자신들도 미국사회에 통합되어 있다는 확신을 갖게 하는 일종의 가시적 상징이다. 그러나 다문화사회로의 국제이동통을 통한 권력관계의 변화가 그들로 하여금 하위집단으로서 생존할 수 있는 적응전략을 창출해 내게 하였고, 그 과정에서 정체성의 변화는 필연적이라 하겠다. 민족정체성은 사회공간적 현상과 밀접히 연결되어 있는 가변적 현상인 것이다.

主要語: 베트남 이민, 다문화주의, 하위민족 집단, 민족정체성, 적응전략