Essay

The dream of a Vietnamese

By
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In Hackney, the Vietnamese diaspora's archiving of the past turns shared trauma into a shared dream.

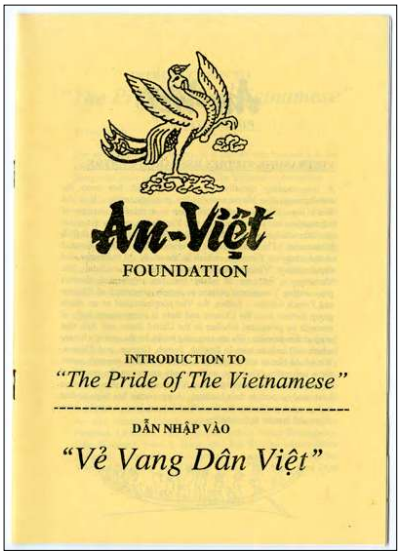

IMAGE 38
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Dũ Khánh Thành, the Vietnamese refugee who escaped to Britain and served as a beloved Hackney councillor between 2002 and 2006, was born into war. Vietnam, then known as French Indochina, was engulfed in conflict between the **Việt Minh**, a Communist-dominated resistance group that fought for the country's independence, and the colonial occupying forces of France and Japan.

It was 1944 — 'the hungry year', as many Vietnamese now call it. The Japanese had stopped farmers in **Vũ's** village in North Vietnam from growing rice and instead forced them to farm jute — an inedible tough fibre — for making ropes and other military supplies. It was dire, with little hope of transporting rice from the south of the country because the Americans had bombed the road to prevent the Japanese from expanding there. The ensuing, lesser-documented famine killed an estimated two million people in the northern Red River Delta of Vietnam. **Vũ's** mother died when he was very young, along with two of his siblings, from what was believed to be starvation.

'All I remember is fire', wrote **Vũ** in his memoirs, published in 2016, as he chronicled his childhood memories of an unexpected **Việt Minh** attack on his village. 'I hid in the bomb shelter with some of my siblings. I couldn't see what was happening, but I heard screams of anger and screams of anguish...Then we noticed the bodies. As a young child, I forgot how the entire village was permeated with fear and how scared I was'. **Vũ's** remembrances are interwoven with joyful times playing hopscotch in the scorching heat and celebrating the Lunar New Year with massive feasts and kite-flying. 'We also had a three-day festival to honour the God of the village', he recounted. 'This was not a God from heaven, but the spirit of someone who once lived in the village and did good things or was a hero when alive'.

Not only was the physical environment blighted by the years of conflict and colonisation stretching between the 1930s and 1970s, but the designation of many Vietnamese civilians and army personnel (on all sides) as *missing* and the decades-long separation of siblings, children and parents, completely upended a community's sense of itself and its own record. Hundreds of thousands are still missing from the thirty years of fighting before 1975. Throughout Vietnam's long, cruel history of being buffeted by forces within and outside the country, communities were constantly forced to navigate open wounds, as people died or were inexplicably severed from their family and friends — who were left chasing unlocatable ghosts. Others who were persecuted or imprisoned were consigned to footnotes in the long tail of war.

Decades after the attack on **Vũ's** rural village, during the Second Indochina War (or Vietnam War), the US military weaponised precisely these horrors to gain advantage over its opponent. From 1964, the US tested a new kind of psychological warfare that tapped into fears in some Vietnamese cultures that if a person is improperly buried, then their soul continues to wander the earth. American forces recorded eerie, echoey sounds to mimic disembodied voices of the war dead, and blared the cassette tapes in jungles and villages to strike fear into North Vietnamese people. These noises of fallen soldiers terrorised through absence, never allowing those open wounds to heal.

Hunger would haunt **Vũ**, as he wrote in his recollections, when he fled the southern city of Trà Vinh in a fishing boat that was nine metres long and two metres wide. It was his fifth attempt at escape. The ship was designed to take three or four men out to sea for a couple of days, not forty one men, women and children for two weeks. 'I felt weak and dizzy but tried to stay alert in the hope that we would spot a ship that would rescue us', he wrote. 'We floated, hungry, literally dying of thirst, unable to rest'. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that between 200,000 and 400,000 people died trying to leave the country by boat in the 1970s and 1980s in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. But the real figures are unknown.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is common among the thousands who survived the perilous sea journeys. While some are haunted by ghosts of the past, some are haunted by the living. My Vietnamese uncle remembers meeting a victim of pirates, who were responsible for capturing and killing many refugees. She had been dragged on to their ship and raped over three days, before being thrown overboard.

One lesser-noted aspect of the great suffering throughout history has been the immensity of the salvaging project that follows, as oppressed peoples strive to shine light in the darkness. The State of Disappearance, a collaborative project that started in 2017, drew together research and artistic reflections about how regimes from Argentina to Colombia inflicted a 'systematic policy of human disappearance' that also enabled the widespread erasure or denial of peoples' histories. As Brad Evans, professor of political violence and aesthetics at Bath university, and Mexican abstract painter Chantal Meza, reflected in a lecture on the project:

'We quickly came to understand how living with disappearance...proves to be truly unbearable, for the violence it passes onto others after the initial act of abduction offered no kind of resolution and no prospect for recovery, as it assaulted the very order of time itself. How can one possibly escape such a nightmare, when love is turned into a violent haunting?'

But what if we could use storytelling to commune with the ghosts of the past, to imagine alternative futures and realise vanquished dreams? What if we could reclaim the power of collective memory that had been disturbingly wielded by our oppressors? This question lies at the heart of the **An Việt** Archives, the largest known community archive of British-Vietnamese history in the UK. The **An Việt** Archives was set up in 2021 to preserve the memories of the **An Việt** Foundation, a community centre in Hackney established by **Vũ** in 1981 to support Vietnamese refugees in Britain.

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To be a refugee is to be perpetually conscious of border crossings — from one country to another, one state to another, one timeline to another. As I have witnessed in my family, who like **Vũ** had escaped their homeland Vietnam by boat, many Vietnamese people are caught between remembering and forgetting what they left behind. When my family arrived in Britain in 1979-80, at first in a refugee camp, their only thought was about survival and carving out a livelihood in the UK's complex system. Processing the magnitude of the leap they had taken, and the sacrifices that had meant, would be lifelong — like sifting through the dust of remembrance that had settled deep in their bones.

Tracing my community's traumatic stories as a Vietnamese woman born in Britain and piecing together the small fragments that my parents rarely revealed has significantly shaped my personal history, shading it into a grand narrative of refugee escape. Growing up, I was surrounded by a myriad of different languages; not just Vietnamese, but also Cantonese and Teochew, the lesser-spoken Chinese dialect of my ancestors that I had never heard elsewhere. It made me feel like we had been flung from a faraway tribe. I felt pulled between the heritage that was telegraphed by my appearance and the British culture of our "host" country — with the internalised pressure to 'fit in' subsuming my parents' gentle efforts to teach me all these languages and cultures. I had gone to school in Buckingham, a small white-British-dominated market town that had an M&Co (the recently defunct clothing chain) and a smattering of charity

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shops on its high street. It was not until I moved to London in 2021 when I met other Vietnamese people.

As lockdown plunged us all into a bout of soul-searching and hobby development, I started exchanging emails with artist/DJ/researcher **Cường Phạm**, who invited me to help manage an archival project which would later become the **An Việt** Archives. I became connected with others from similar backgrounds, many of whom were also digging into family history. I felt like my little streamlet was suddenly feeding into the vast estuary of the **Viet** diaspora.

Much like my sense of who I was and where I came from, the archive was in a fragile state — dispersed across unordered, uncatalogued boxes.

Spanning nearly forty years, the colossal collection of historical documents, scholarship, community activism and design sprung from the **An Việt** Foundation (AVF), which **Vũ** founded to support thousands of Vietnamese and Southeast Asian people who had fled persecution and danger following the fall of Saigon and the end of the Second Indochina war. In Vietnamese, **An Việt** means 'well settled'. **Vũ's** dream for the space was not only immediate safety and warmth, but also legitimacy — it was to be a hub for knowledge-sharing and the study of Vietnamese people 'for postgraduate scholars' and beyond.

AVF provided home-cooked food, help with housing, addiction, English language and mother-tongue classes for the refugees, many of whom were initially scattered across the country in sleepy rural towns under the then-prime minister Margaret Thatcher's flawed 'dispersal' policy. Thatcher had feared 'ghettos' would emerge if Vietnamese people weren't separated in this way, but the policy only deepened the sense of isolation among these already vulnerable people.

As one survey from the 1980s, documented in the archive, found:

'Half of those interviewed had no educational or occupational qualifications. Some had had their education interrupted because of their flight from Vietnam and others had been prohibited for political reasons'.

Vũ, who supported many refugees in moving to new housing in Hackney and other local authorities in the UK, witnessed a 'type of disconnection' in people's eyes, 'as if they had discovered that they were no longer anchored to a shore but now adrift in the sea again'.

The AVF's long standing home was an old bath house on Englefield Road in Dalston. After the organisation shuttered in 2017, the building was squatted and the archives were almost lost to water damage and mould. In 2021, the charity Hackney Chinese Community Services and Hackney Archives were granted funding to rescue the **An Việt** Foundation's Archives. The collections were brought together and transferred to their Hackney Archives home in the Dalston CLR James Library, where the National Conservation Service cleaned and stabilised them. Six of us — supported by the Hackney Archives — formed a volunteer group to make practical decisions about the AVA: for example, on public access. We thought deeply about staying true to its East London origins, but also about propelling it forward so that in the future it can continue to help others within the wider estuary of Vietnamese immigrants in Britain. The archive has always *existed*, and yet the physical act of sifting through and reuniting the boxes initiated a new dialogue with AVF memories and ghosts. They have been salvaged and rethreaded into a reinterpretation of the past from the constantly shifting perspective of the present.

The process of archiving is a process of healing, says **Trà My Hickin**, one of the volunteer archivists helping manage the AVA. As we find ways to interpret and narrate the archive — through our workshops, round tables or artist commissions — layers of storytelling accrue. They distance us from the trauma of the past, creating common ground where both the older and younger generations can seek solace. **Vũ's** dream of the legitimacy of Vietnamese heritage in Britain endures both *within* the archive itself, and in the interactions with it, as viewers inherit sympathy and understanding in the act of engaging with the materials and hearing new stories.

The nature of the diasporic experience can flit between idealising the homeland and running away from it. As a collective, the AVA gravitates towards Vietnamese diaspora artists with a story to tell — and has bonded with many creatives through workshops, artist talks and other events in the UK, Vietnam and the US. In Homage To Quan m, artist Maria **Vũ** delves into her own archive of materials from growing up in a Vietnamese-British-French Buddhist family, enfolded in the tastes, smells and sounds of devoutness. Homage to Quan m, which exhibited at London's Arebyte Gallery from 28 March to 19 May, explores her complex journey away from refusal, and towards acceptance and understanding. **Vũ** carefully unravels the threads of her childhood and weaves them into a 'remixed' pattern of meaning, splicing Buddhist imagery with *South Park* and *The Simpsons*. Quan m, the Viet name of Bodhisattva (Buddhist deity) of Compassion, Mercy and Medicine, recalled memories of visiting temples when I was younger.

The remixing using AR and AI 'intertwines the real world with computer-generated content, sometimes making it difficult to know where the real/digital, imagined/authentic, craziness/ culture begins and ends', wrote **Cường Minh Bá Phạm**, from the AVA, contributing to the exhibition booklet. When responding to the archives at a joint panel event in April this year with Hickin, **Vũ** explained what she felt coming into contact with the **An Việt** Archives, both in their home in Hackney Archives and in the gallery space. Although the people photographed in the archive were strangers to her, viewing the collections evoked strong feelings from her childhood. Archives are vessels in which the past and present, memory and dream, interact with each other. The **An Việt** Archives chronicles the mundane and overlooked stories often lost in the grand narratives of war, like the daily degradations of bureaucracy, the boredom and longing for familiarity that my dad had spoken of. Yet it is precisely by hosting our collective memory and communing with the ghosts of the past that the archives function as an act of repair, uncovering histories to see them anew.