

David Cheng: A Refugee's Chronicle for Survival

By Jonathan Dean

Those who jump in learn to swim fast or perish

David Cheng's earliest memory as a 12-year-old boy is in Vietnam sitting upon his rooftop on clear nights to watch the awe-inspiring light display that the anti-aircraft guns would put on as they tried to take down American planes. The tracers would stream across the sky like meteors and the boom of the guns would rattle even the most hardened soul. The reason for the display was lost to his adolescent mind at the time—there was only the fireworks show. Sometimes his curiosity was rewarded by being shot at by sentries for being out past curfew.

Some may believe that the age-old American dream of working hard to gain success is dead, but that depends on your definition of the American dream. For those not having the privilege of being born a natural citizen, that dream is simply making it to America in the hopes of having a better life for themselves and their future family. For Cheng, a man who recently sold his company for close to \$1 billion, the American dream was attained by literally braving rough waters and extreme hardship. When you hear David's story, it'll sound like a cross between a Vietnam War flick and *Cast Away*.

The Great Escape

Cheng is originally from a fishing village in Vietnam. After the fall of Saigon, Cheng's family lived in Communist-controlled Vietnam for over four years, witnessing executions, arrests, families being dragged out of their homes on a whim by men with guns, and even being shot at themselves. After losing his own business (for which he had foraged and worked on his whole life), Cheng's father used his street smarts to keep his family safe from the state and eventually made the decision to leave the country.

One evening, Cheng was told by his father that they needed to leave the village immediately and make as little noise as possible, leaving behind everything but the shorts and sandals he wore. Cheng's family (consisting of himself, his parents, and five other siblings) made their way silently through the twilight to the fishing boats along the shore as the sun was setting.

Under the cover of night, Cheng's family and over 400 other villagers set out in hardly sea-worthy boats, packed in like sardines, and looked to the horizon in search of safe landing. For the first five days, everyone experienced intense hunger, thirst, stormy

weather, and escaping Taiwanese pirates. Cheng was not feel fear for most of the trip, thinking of the whole ordeal as an adventure instead of an escape. He spent most of the five days perched above the pilot's cabin trying to catch the fish that would flop onto the deck.

Surviving in Paradise

After the first few days, the escapees arrived on a small island in Indonesia at dusk and camped there for two weeks, living off the land by fishing without power or running water. Cheng admits that it was one of the most beautiful places he'd ever been to, with white sand beaches, palm trees, and clear blue water—totally untouched by the outside world. This island gave him his first real leisure beach experience, and it was here where he first realized his protective nature over his family. During those two weeks on the beach, Cheng cared for his siblings in addition to improving his swimming and survival skills.

No matter what would happen, Cheng claims that he never really felt fear; to him, it was all still an adventure. The only time Cheng felt fear was when he first learned to dive into the waters surrounding the island. He had a frightening brush with what he thought was a shark—a memory that kept him out of the ocean for many decades.

Cheng's family relocated to an Indonesian refugee camp in the same region for another five months, where an all-day beach adventures and Komodo dragon hunting was commonplace. Cheng was able to reconnect with a school friend from Vietnam while living in the refugee camp, bringing him much-deserved joy in a desperate situation.

After five months had passed, delegates from the U.S. came to the camp and invited Cheng's family to move to America after being interviewed; this invitation came in part because his mother was part White with reddish hair. A long ride on a military cargo plane from Singapore brought Cheng to San Francisco, which he called "Gold Mountain" at the time. The family name (originally Trinh) was changed to Cheng due to its Chinese origins and in part because of political tensions between communist Vietnam and the United States at the time. Cheng does regret that he lost touch with his childhood friend once he came to America; still to this day, he hasn't been able to find his old friend again.

Assimilation and Provocation

Cheng moved to his uncle's house in Los Angeles a few days later and experienced his first major American custom: Halloween. Since he had had no previous experience with the holiday, Cheng and his siblings were unfamiliar with the well-known tradition of wearing costumes and seeking treats from the neighbors. To them, the loud people outside their front door were crazy thugs trying to break in and attack them. Since Cheng's family had experienced being mugged for food in Vietnam, they became scared and were ready to defend themselves with kitchen knives and broomsticks. His uncle only laughed at their culture shock upon returning home, but to Cheng, the threat seemed very real and close to home.

Cheng admits to being a fighter his whole life, from being protective of his family to getting in a fight on his first day of school (though it was all due to a simple cultural miscommunication). Even though we must all abstain from violence, the ability to fight for what you want is a quality that every entrepreneur should have at their core.

Cheng reveals that his experiences growing up as a fighter in a Communist setting really helped shape his attitude and approach to problems in the future. He remembers waiting in line and virtually begging for rations in Vietnam, all the while having to protect himself, his food, and his belongings from thugs who would mug anyone to give themselves more. There was also an annual voiding of currency to prevent anyone from saving up or making money—a truly anti-capitalist practice. In the old world, Cheng learned how to fight to survive. The values of standing your ground and going after what you want have definitely followed him from that white sandy beach in Indonesia.

Fighting for More than Food

While Cheng found American food very appetizing, he acquired a taste for knowledge. Though he struggled at first for social acceptance, he found out very quickly that he had an aptitude for math. He loved all things in numbers and found that “computer science came easy to [him] for some reason, but English was tough.” While his father was out pursuing the American Dream by finding entrepreneurial opportunities (starting off at an uncle's farm and ending up in manufacturing), Cheng himself was learning a new language made up of 1s and 0s.

He was “organically ambitious,” having a natural curiosity about the world and problem solving—truly a chip off the old block from his father. However, his father warned him:

“You have to be careful of what goals you set.” There is a Chinese saying that states, “the higher you are, it hurts more when you fall.”

Before Cheng ever went to work in business, he wanted to join the military because of his experiences with the U.S. soldiers as a boy at the refugee camp. He wanted to be an Air Force pilot because he saw the jets that used to fly over his native Vietnam and thought they were the most powerful things he’d ever witnessed—and he wanted to possess that power. A psychiatrist friend of Cheng’s later revealed to him that it was his inner desire to protect and survive that drove this yearning to be in the military. Ultimately, he didn’t join up because his father reasoned that he had fought so hard to get the family away from war in Vietnam. However, Cheng did get his wish to serve more recently in the form of working with the U.S. Marshalls, his current venture.

Venturing Out into the Real World

Cheng made it through high school and, heeding his father’s words, attended college instead. He began to really hone his engineering and computer science skills at Pasadena College and University of California, Irvine. He realized he had a knack for computers when he was able to fix a programming error that his college friend couldn’t figure out. An initial motivator for finishing his education was money, having grown up poor. However, Cheng now feels that “money is all relative” in hindsight and doesn’t make him necessarily happy. Earning money did “remove a lot of the noise,” and hardship from his life, but ultimately, he now thinks of money as a means of concentrating on what you really want to do and finding what makes you truly happy.

Right out of college, Cheng went to work for Xerox, but ran into the familiar constraints large companies put on their employees. “[I] learned very quickly that in large companies, there is a lot of hypocrisy—there’s a lot of red tape,” Cheng reveals after trying to install his own monitor at work and receiving an angry letter from Xerox’s union attorney. “I wasn’t very happy not being able to do the things I wanted to do. You have so many ideas—you want to be creative, and you want to figure things out [and] solve problems. It’s like working with one hand tied behind your back.”

Taking the Right Path on the Journey

Cheng’s turning point came when he was driving his father to LAX, telling him that he wanted to be an engineer. His father told him, “It’s good that you want to be an engineer, but engineers always work for someone else, and I know you’re more

ambitious than that.” Cheng’s father pointed to the skyscrapers in downtown LA and asked, “Who do you think owns those buildings: the engineers or the businessmen?” It was then that Cheng reevaluated his life ambitions. He decided to pursue his own interests and later sell his company for hundreds of millions of dollars.

When asked about what makes an entrepreneur, Cheng simply states that “It’s passion above all else. You have to want to do something; you set a goal and put some passion behind it and resiliency behind it, and really enjoy the journey of getting there.” Cheng himself has had quite a journey, and not just in business. “An entrepreneur doesn’t measure himself or herself on getting there, they measure themselves on the journey that they take.”

Cheng’s newest venture has come in the form of Zaka, Inc. Building upon the popularity of mobile apps, “Zaka will empower small businesses by providing real-time capabilities in understanding and managing their prospects and customers. The immediate feed of customers and prospects info along with easy-to-use tools will give businesses the power to quickly capture and retain customers. All of this on a revolutionary mobile app that does not require the cost and resources of a traditional CRM system.”

Cheng closes with this sentiment: “People ask me, ‘How do you know what path to take? How can you take that first step when you don’t know the path [or] where it’s going to lead?’ I give an analogy: You’ve got to get across this forest—you know you have to get across it and you don’t know what’s in it. You can follow the path that’s already set by people (you kind of don’t know where that leads either) or you can set your own path, [just] as long as you set the goal of getting to the other side. If you hit a wall, punch through the wall, climb over it, or walk around it. If you hit a river, swim through it or build a bridge across it. Whatever it is, you’ll always get to the other side. As an entrepreneur, you’ll figure it out and enjoy that path.”

Remember entrepreneurs: it’s a jungle out there, and if you want to survive, you’ll have to brave every adversity and fight to make the journey worthwhile.

*Original article can be found at <http://www.impact.fm/david-cheng-refugees-chronicle-survival/>