

Memory is the Message

My Lens as a 1st-Gen. Vietnamese-American

Tina Phan



On True War Stories

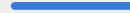
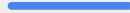
“If American war stories favor frontline vividness, for many Southeast Asians, wherever they happen to be, true war stories are both vivid and banal, since the war was fought on their territory, in their cities, on their farms, within their own families. For some readers or viewers, these kinds of true war stories are not ‘good’ war stories because they lack the vicarious thrill found in stories about soldiers killing and being killed. Simply by their content, true war stories about civilians and banalities are, for some, boring and hence forgettable.”

On True War Stories (cont.)

“This is true for large numbers of Southeast Asians, many of whom were born after war’s end and are impatient with their elders’ stories. But for many who lived through the war, its memory remains as bright as magnesium flare, illuminating darkness and signaling danger. For those Southeast Asians cast overseas as losers, the need to remember their war stories is even more urgent. **They sense that the war may be forgotten**, or narrated differently than they remember.”

- Viet Thanh Nguyen

A Condensed Timeline – My Paternal Lineage



The Fall of Saigon

My father is 4 years old when Saigon falls and his father is imprisoned.

The Leave

Almost 2 decades later, the family is able to seek asylum and emigrate to the United States, landing as sponsored refugees in Louisiana.

1st Gen. is Born

My brother is born May 16, 2007.

I am born November 14, 2008.

Multi-Generation Return

My family and I travel back to Vietnam. It is my father's first time back since leaving.

The Before



1990.

Film type unknown.

Point & shoot, camera unknown.

Ryan Phan, second to right,
surrounded by siblings and other
family.

Edited by Tina Phan.

1988.

Film type unknown.

Camera unknown.

Village in rural Central
Vietnam.

Father & high school friends.

Edited by Tina Phan.





Late 1980s.

Film type unknown.

Camera unknown.

Saigon, Vietnam (presently
Ho Chi Minh City).

Mother & family.

Edited by Tina Phan.

The Return



Dec. 31, 2015

Sony DSC-RX100, 28-100mm

Saigon, Vietnam (presently Ho Chi Minh City).

Cờ đỏ sao vàng – Red Flag with Golden Star ; National Flag of Vietnam post-war.

Dec. 30, 2015

Sony DSC-RX100,
28-100mm

Da Nang, Vietnam.

Father by family graves.





Dec. 30, 2015

Sony DSC-RX100, 28-100mm

Da Nang, Vietnam.

Distant relative beckoning towards family graves.



Dec. 30, 2015

Sony DSC-RX100, 28-100mm

Da Nang, Vietnam.

Family placing incense at relatives' graves.



Dec. 31, 2015.

Sony DSC-RX100, 28-100mm

Da Nang, Vietnam.

Author in family home.

Jan. 1, 2016

Sony DSC-RX100, 28-100mm

Ba Na Hills, Da Nang, Vietnam.

Biblical depiction.





Dec. 31, 2015

Sony DSC-RX100, 28-100mm

Da Nang, Vietnam.

Father & estranged uncle.

Dec. 31, 2015

Sony DSC-RX100, 28-100mm

Da Nang, Vietnam.

Siblings.

Portrait shot by Ryan Phan.

Edited by Tina Phan.





On War Stories (Part II)

“What turns people into zombies? Memories. Because these people might be infectious and threatening, Americans may wish to quarantine their memories and war stories, their tales of being the living dead, which remind us that the inhuman is present within us.”

- Viet Thanh Nguyen