

Austin Nguyen

UWP001

Garin Hay

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The Importance of Cultural Literacy

Growing up as a first-generation Vietnamese in America, I was never too closely tied to my roots. Even though I grew up in San Jose, California, a city that is about 10% Vietnamese, learning about my culture was never a priority to me. When I was young, my cousins would often mock me because my Vietnamese tongue and connection to the Vietnamese culture and heritage was significantly weaker than theirs. I would hear a language that was essentially foreign to me, only being able to pick out certain basic words. I didn't know or understand any of the stories that were passed down from my grandparents to my parents. The thought of disappointment rushed through my head filling the empty space of where my knowledge of culture and heritage should have been. My mom noticed this and figured that the best thing to do was to enroll me in a Vietnamese learning school that taught the language as well as cultural preservation.

Every Sunday, I would have to wake up as early as 7AM in order to get ready for what was essentially 4 hours of straight schooling on the weekend. Needless to say, as a kid I wasn't especially thrilled with having to wake up early and lose a quarter of my day to school. As I progressed through the classes over 4 years, my affinity for Vietnamese heightened and I started to have a better basis in speaking and reading the language. While my Vietnamese definitely got better, I still wasn't in touch with my cultural roots.

It wasn't until my high school years that I started becoming more involved with the Vietnamese community and culture when I decided to register for a Vietnamese language class. As my parents seldomly exposed me to Vietnamese culture, I was learning everything for the first time. I had to work remarkably hard to keep in close competition with my peers, eventually exceeding almost everyone in the class. However, being competitive wasn't a main priority for me anymore; there was a genuine desire to learn about my native country and its history. Over the course of several chapters, I was exposed to Vietnam through a viewing lens. While my experience was not first-hand, learning about the traditions such as Black April or the celebration of dead ancestors propelled me to dive deeper into my culture. Learning about the depth and varied traditions was eye-opening and led me to become more passionate to learn about the Vietnamese culture that I never grew up with.

As I started to excel in my Vietnamese class, it prompted me to start participating within my school's Vietnamese community. It began with me joining the school's VSA (Vietnamese Student Association) and regularly participating in club events. I first started out as a member but eventually rose up and assumed a leadership role. Hearing about the chance to become a board member for the club, I immediately signed up, thinking about the possibility to play a bigger role in the community. Doing so allowed me to help others experience the cultural opportunities that I was able to. I could finally make a change to fulfill that missing connection to my culture that was absent for a majority of my life.

Throughout all of this, I was fairly content with how much more linked to my culture I was becoming. But there was just one problem: I learned all about the culture second-hand, while all of my cousins and relatives were lucky enough to go to the motherland and experience everything themselves. Visiting Vietnam was the one itch I most definitely had to get scratched.

I pestered my mom for weeks begging her to book flights and persuading her that her relatives back in Vietnam missed her greatly. Inevitably, she was worn down from all the questions and pleading that she decided to surprise me and make it a family trip.

Once the plane touched the ground and we were finally in Vietnam, I was overrun with excitement and glee. I saw my dad talking to some stranger who shared a striking similarity with him...until I realized it was my uncle from my dad's side. Meeting my uncle would mark the start of a 3 week-long cross-country road trip, from Saigon to Da Nang. In Saigon, my parents and uncle took me to sightsee various tourist spots and areas of their childhood. We passed a building that I recognized but I couldn't quite place. I had to think back to my Viet class and recall that it was the Independence Palace, a landmark that stood as a symbol of the end of the Vietnam War. I mentioned this to my parents and talked a little about its history, surprising them both with a little bit of my knowledge of the culture.

Following Saigon, we visited Phan Thiet, the city my dad grew up in. There, I met the other half of my family, my dad's side. We rolled up to the house and saw everyone on the front steps, waiting to welcome us. My dad introduced me to my paternal grandmother for the first time as well as the rest of his siblings and cousins. That night, we went to eat as a family and caught up with each other to make up for the 20 years that he was in the States. My grandmother told me stories about the Vietnam War that resulted in my parents leaving for America. Recalling back to when I learned about it in high school, I didn't think too much about how much of an impact it really had but hearing the stories told with distress and pain really called attention to how important it was to my family. After hearing about the war first-hand, I viewed my parents in a different way - I saw them as victims of a terrible situation who struggled through hardships to give me a better life. Without their sacrifice, I wouldn't be the person I am today.

Afterwards, we all traveled to my mom's home city, Hoi An. As everyone in my family is Buddhist, we visited a popular Buddhist temple to meditate and pray as a family - wishing for prosperity, good health, and safe travels. I also learned a Vietnamese variation of the origin story of Siddhartha Gautama. Buddhism does not necessarily play a large religious role in my family but we look to it as guidelines of how to act morally and shapes our perspective of the world. It was interesting to see how there were slight cultural differences but ultimately Buddhism was embedded into our lifestyles in the same way.

Coincidentally, we happened to be in Vietnam for one of my mom's uncle's death anniversary. One's death anniversary is a big part of the culture in Vietnam because it is the commemoration of the deceased. Additionally, it is one of the few times that the entire family gets together to feast and share their stories. I have been celebrating them ever since I was a kid but to celebrate one in Vietnam with both of my parent's families was an experience I would never forget. I got to help decorate the altar and learn a little about the dishes that they prepared for the meal. I was a little skeptical at some of the dishes because they had strange ingredients, but it was a delight to try it for the first time.

Being a Vietnamese-American and not knowing much about my language, culture, or heritage stood as a point for me to realize that I was not nearly in touch with my roots as I would have liked to be. Having grown up focusing mainly on academic literacies, I never sought the opportunity to learn about the cultural literacy that surrounded me; not until I came to the epiphany that it was essential that I learn about my Vietnamese culture in order to truly understand my full identity and belonging. After being able to extensively immerse myself in the heart and soul of Vietnam, as cliché as it sounds, I actually understood what it was like to be Vietnamese. It was one thing to hear about the stories told by my friends and family, but it was a

whole other thing to see it with my own eyes. The exposure of going to Vietnam really helped shape my cultural identity because now, I could relate to my family's experiences. The ability to connect to my culture first-hand on a personal level was an eye-opening moment as I felt I was integrated and not an outsider. Going through all of this allowed me to see that I shouldn't take the ability of being culturally literate for granted and that I should embrace it because it is a representation of who I am today.