

Journey Back to the West

“Chao em,” meaning hello younger person of my generation, was how I was greeted when I visited Vietnam for the first time, as the sweltering humidity and darkness enveloped my family leaving the airport. After 23 hours of flying and a layover in Tokyo, we had arrived at my mother’s childhood home in Saigon, Vietnam. We spent a whole month in Vietnam, mainly in Saigon, a few days in the countryside where my dad grew up, and a few days touring places like Da lat in central Vietnam, where the temperature dropped low enough to need a jacket and for beautiful hydrangeas to bloom. I was only nine years old at the time. It was a family vacation like no other, but looking back, there were a lot of things I did not realize and did not worry about, but really should have thought about.

Xin chao ban, ten toi la Leyna. Hi, my name is Leyna and I was named after a Vietnamese news reporter who worked on an American news channel. Why you may ask? My mom thought it was impressive that a Vietnamese woman can work for American television and she hoped for the same great opportunities for me. My story begins with my parents. My parents are originally from South Vietnam, where they grew up their entire lives until 1975 when their lives changed forever. 1975 marked the end of the Vietnam war, which brought starvation, restrictions, and loss to the people of Vietnam. My parents left Vietnam in secrecy, landing in odd parts of the world, with no clue on whether they’ll live to see their loved ones again. Fortunately, they eventually made it to the United States, with the hopes of a better life and opportunities for their children, the classic American dream. That is how my brother and I came about and that is how I am able to be here to tell this story now.

Toi sinh ra o Los Angeles. I was born in Los Angeles, California, and grew up in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood. Hispanic and American cultures are what I saw and experienced on a daily basis outside my home: at the supermarket, at school, and in my neighborhood. At home, I was surrounded by Vietnamese culture. The classic ancestral altar, the food, the clothes, and the holidays were all embodied at home by my parents as best as they could in America. I was raised with the label, “Vietnamese-American.” That’s who I am because of where my parents came from. However, I didn’t fully understand what it meant to be both Vietnamese and American and the implications that came with it.

I was the only Asian girl in my class from elementary to high school. Was I different? Sure, but no one ever made me feel that way because of the American culture that connected us. At least, I was fortunate for that. This is not a story of outer conflict, but of the conflicting experiences I had growing up as a Vietnamese American. Growing up, my parents spoke Vietnamese, so I learned to understand when the language was spoken, but they were never strict on my brother and I on learning to speak, let alone read or write, Vietnamese. We only spoke English with our parents, which I’ve learned is a common occurrence among children of immigrants. I thought it was fine because everyone spoke English. That’s all that seemed important, until you go to a place where no one speaks English.

There was one incident during our 2009 trip to Vietnam that changed the way I thought about my identity as a Vietnamese American. We were riding a bus as we traveled from city to city. My brother and I, as children, spoke and played games in English to pass the time. An older woman asked my mom in Vietnamese, “Were they born here?” My mom, playfully testing the waters on if she can pass us off as locals, said yes, but this older woman refused to take this answer. She complained about how all we spoke was English and how she had not heard a single word of Vietnamese from us during that three-hour bus ride. It made me question things because to her we were just Americans, even though I felt so strongly connected to Vietnam. Maybe it was all just a facade? Maybe I wasn’t as Vietnamese as I thought? In Vietnam, people knew that I was a “foreigner” by how much English I spoke, and I felt like they would never see me as any more than an American. It made me think about who I was at home in the United States. I might not have felt different from my friends, but in reality, there was a difference. To them, I was the Vietnamese girl. I am Vietnamese-American, but it felt like in one world I was only Vietnamese and in the other, I was only American. Growing up, it didn’t bother me as much as it does now.

It was more in the recent years, as I reflect on my childhood, that I wish I truly understood what it meant to be Vietnamese-American. What did the cultures mean to me? Were they relevant to my life? The American side was easier to develop through public schooling and befriending the neighborhood kids. I thought the Vietnamese culture I had at home taught me enough about that side of me. It wasn’t enough and there were clues back then that it wasn’t. I missed all of them. I regret missing them. A big clue was my grandfather, who cared for my brother and I while my parents worked late hours. He didn’t speak any English except for food words like “McDonalds” and “pizza.” I couldn’t talk to him. We didn’t speak the same language. I thought it was fine. I remember bringing home books about Vietnam from my school’s library, just to show him as a way to talk to him when I couldn’t with words. He would try to point at things and explain things when a language barrier that I wish didn’t exist, existed. He’s gone now. I can’t show him books anymore. I can’t show him how hard I’m trying to learn Vietnamese now.

Toi rat co gang. I try really hard. I didn’t want to believe that I had given up on that side of me. I am American and I am Vietnamese. Even if one part of the world thinks I’m one or the other, that didn’t matter to me anymore when I realized that only I can define my own identity. At school, I’m not just a Vietnamese girl. I am the Vietnamese American chasing her dream of bettering the world. I’m making an effort to speak more Vietnamese and to learn more about the culture because I want to. I want to understand where my parents came from and the traditions that I grew up with. I want to show others and myself that I’m not an ignorant American. I am connected to my roots. I am Vietnamese-American. There was a moment last year that made me realize the importance of learning one’s family language. An older Vietnamese man, around his 70s, struggled to use an ATM machine and he asked for help. He

spoke no English. I was very nervous at first, with the words of that lady a decade ago saying that I'm only American ringing in my ear. I tried. I struggled, but as I spoke slowly and calmly and he understood me, my confidence began to grow. I was able to help and though I wish I could have given him the parting words I wish I knew how to say, that moment showed me how proud I should be of my identity.

I call this chapter of my life and the lessons I've learned, "Journey Back to the West," a play on the title of a classic movie I watched as a kid called "Journey to the West," which was about the journey of an emperor monkey to discover what lay in the west. For me, I am journeying back to the west, back to Vietnam, to learn more about my cultural roots that has helped define me as the person I am today. If only I can meet that woman from the bus again now. She might be surprised that I can actually speak Vietnamese, though she may still label me as an American. That's okay because I am, but I am also Vietnamese. I still have a long way to go. As you can even see, the Vietnamese words I've used here don't have the correct accents on them. I'm still learning, and I will continue to learn.