The helicopter descended into a throng of people, crowded atop the United States embassy in Saigon. As Communist tanks wheeled their way into the center of the capital, the crowd pushes forward in hopes of escaping the ever-increasing influence of the Communist regime. As the selected few are chosen to ride the helicopter, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives gathered on the roof push in hopes of a new freedom in the new world. But few are chosen, and many are left standing in the remains of a once-democratic nation. This image, documented during the fall of Saigon in the Vietnam War, is similar to a number of other escapes by Vietnamese all around Vietnam. Men, women, and children were packed onto boats and helicopters in a massive diaspora of Vietnamese citizens, interrupting the lives of families, of villages in Vietnam. These refugees were looking to begin a new life outside of Vietnam, armed only with a few family treasures that were packed hastily into their bags. But these helicopters and boats were carrying a treasure much more valuable than the material treasures of the wealthiest refugee family. Within these vehicles, the Vietnamese identity was being transported. Its customs and its traditions were transported by rotor and by boat across the Pacific Ocean to countries such as the Philippines, Hong Kong, Australia, and most importantly the United States of America. Here in Southern California the Vietnamese community has established an identity among the suburbs of Orange County in an area known as Little Saigon. Within this center of Vietnamese activity, the Vietnamese traditions and customs are revealed—
its festivals, its food, its music. But the Vietnamese culture comprises of more than just food and art. From across the ocean, the refugees also brought the Vietnamese perception of family to the United States, a familial identity created under the influences of both religion and state.

The concept of the Vietnamese family was able to escape from Vietnam and land on the shores of the United States. The enduring qualities of the Vietnamese family that allowed this uniquely Vietnamese idea of family to escape to the United States arose from a multitude of past, competing influences, most notably the religious beliefs from Confucius-influenced China and the political beliefs of Communism. Through the rhetorical effects of Confucius’ *Xiao Jing* and the laws and legislation of the Communist party, the Vietnamese idea of family has evolved into a final culmination of these beliefs, and is reflected in the structure and ideology surrounding the Vietnamese family. This idea was exported to the United States along with other Vietnamese traditions as a result of the Vietnam War. Once on American soil, the refugees underwent forms of acculturation and assimilation, which resulted in a modification of the family structure and ideology to a more “American” form of family. Much like the influences of Confucius and Communism in Vietnam, American influences became a dramatic component in this global dialogue—this dialogue on the definition of family. Throughout its journey from Vietnam to the United States, the Vietnamese family has become a product of religious and political rhetoric, but with its exportation to America, it has also become a product of global exchange.

The earliest forms of social organization in Vietnam arose out of necessity, particularly because of its agricultural economy. Groups of farmers and their families formed clans to share the workload of farming. In this agricultural civilization, the individual's interest is tied closely to the interest of the clan (Le 25). This leads to a higher value placed on the society, rather than the individual. This idea of a collective community and its value over one's individual interests
becomes a maxim for the Vietnamese family as clans slowly gave way to extended family lineages (V. Pham 13).\^1

Although the idea that the society outweighed the individual may have stemmed from a physical need for cooperation, the ideas of Confucius were also integral in developing the Vietnamese familial identity, which similarly valued the family unit over the individuals. In Confucius’ text, the *Xiao Jing*, Confucius defines the term “filial piety” as love for one’s parents and one’s ancestors, a love built out of respect for authority and a love built out of loyalty to the family. Confucius hails this idea of filial piety as “the perfect virtue,” “the stem out of which grows all moral teaching” (*Sacred* I. iii). Because filial piety and its “emphasis on group interdependence, harmony in interpersonal relations, and conformity to group norms” were morals that valued the subordination of the individual to the will of the community, Confucius’ *Xiao Jing* became a revered text used as justification for the Vietnamese communal lifestyle, occupying the cornerstone of Vietnamese thought on the family (qtd. in Dao 17).

The *Xiao Jing* was a religious text that stressed specific values, ideals that were translated into the Vietnamese thought of family. Through the effects of the religious rhetoric within the *Xiao Jing*, the Vietnamese family became closely linked with the perfect family described in Confucius’ text. Confucius asserts that the basis for filial piety comes from the debt of the child to the parents. In his text, Confucius says, “The son derives his life from his parents, and no greater gift could possibly be transmitted” (*Sacred* IX. v). The son owes his parents the greatest gift he can give in exchange for the gift of life. Not only does the son owe his life, he must use his life to “make [the family] name famous in future ages and thereby glorify our parents” (*Sacred* I. iii). “This,” Confucius says, “is the end of filial piety” (*Sacred* I. iii). In a way, the relationship between parent and child resembles an economic exchange—one in which a debt

\^1 Because I have a number of sources from authors with the same last name, I will cite an abbreviated form of their first name along with their last name.
must be paid off. Confucius’ focus on the economical aspect of the family strips the parent-child relationship of any emotional bond, and instead emphasizes the glorification of the family unit.

In his description of the perfect son and his role in the family, Confucius undermines the importance of personal relationships and instead emphasizes the family’s ceremonial façade, a structure meant to display glory for others. Confucius says, “He who loves his parents will not dare (to incur the risk of) being hated by any man, and he who reveres his parents will not dare (to incur the risk of) being contemned by any man” (Sacred II. i). Confucius interestingly focuses on the perception of “any man,” and gaining the approval of “any man” rather than loving his parents for the sake of loving his parents. With his emphasis on gaining the approval of others, Confucius’ family becomes stripped of any emotional bond, and is replaced by an economical bond that is to be displayed for the approval of others. Confucius modulates the family into becoming a unit empty of emotion, but full of formal displays of obedience. Tram Pham, a Vietnamese citizen who grew up in Saigon, corroborates this formal structure of the family when she recounts that her 15-member household had a family that was “physically close out of necessity, but not necessarily emotionally close” (T. Pham). Pham recalls that she did not share her intimate feelings with those in her household, but was still viewed as a good child because she did not dishonor the family (T. Pham). Like the family of the Xiao Jing, Pham’s family was built on ceremonial displays of respect rather than intimate and emotional bonds.

Confucius’ relative disregard for a true emotional bond is also apparent when he emphasizes traits of the “perfect” son. Confucius stresses certain ceremonial practices of the son that undermine the emotional aspects of family and serve as evidence that the family created out of the Xiao Jing is mostly ceremonial. Confucius dedicates an entire chapter to the procedure of

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2 Tram Pham is the writer’s (Paul Nguyenfa’s) mother.
mourning, called “Filial Piety in Mourning for Parents.” In it, he clearly lists the duties of the son when a parent dies:

When a filial son is mourning for a parent, he wails, but not with a prolonged sobbing. In the movements of ceremony he pays no attention to his appearance. His words are without elegance of phrase. He cannot bear to wear fine clothes...Such is the nature of grief or sorrow (Sacred XVIII. i).

Surprisingly, grief or sorrow is not an emotion that is felt. Rather, Confucius asserts that grief is portrayed through ceremonial practices, as duties that must be fulfilled by the “filial son”. In addition, these ceremonial practices demand certain virtues also associated with Confucius’ teachings: obedience, loyalty, courtesy, and respect (Dao 18). Confucius’ focus on ceremonial procedures furthers the perception that a family is empty of emotional bonds, and instead replaces those bonds with ceremonial practices that showcase key Confucian virtues.

Although few Vietnamese practice the Confucian mourning rituals described in the Xiao Jing, the Vietnamese have created their own ceremonial practices that demonstrate Confucian principles. One principle that is highly valued in both Confucian thought and the Vietnamese family is respect. Tram Pham recalls that “the Vietnamese culture places tremendous respect for the elderly” (T. Pham). This respect has become ingrained in the Vietnamese language.

According to Van Bich Pham, there are specific ways to address a person, dependent on the age, and the supposed authority that is ascribed to older people (V. Pham 22). The older people are given titles that suggest their wisdom and authority. However, like the empty mourning practices of Confucius’ teachings, the addressing of an older, more authoritative figure does not necessarily guarantee an actual display of respect. Rather, the language reflects this removed sense of family, a form of family that is satisfied by ceremonial acts of obedience and respect.

In addition to the emptied emotional-structure of family, Confucius’ Xiao Jing had an overwhelming effect on the husband-wife relationship, and more generally the male-female
relationship by ascribing more power to the male. In a description of filial piety that involves the
mother and father, Confucius says,

As they serve their fathers, so they serve their mothers, and they love them equally. As
they serve their fathers, so they serve their rulers, and they reverence them equally.
Hence love is what is chiefly rendered to the mother, and reverence is what is chiefly
rendered to the ruler, while both of these things are given to the father (Sacred V. i).

Although Confucius asserts that the father and mother deserve an equal amount of love, the
father deserves reverence in addition to love. The father is given a preferred position within the
familial structure, as demonstrated by his deserving of both love and reverence. The father is
even equated to a ruler, one in a position of great power. This reflects a Vietnamese saying that
states, “When a woman is born, she is to obey her father. When she gets married, she is to obey
her husband. When her husband dies, she is to obey her son” (T. Pham). At all stages of a
woman’s life, she is subordinate to another, to the masculine ruler of her life. This Vietnamese
maxim is a reflection of the Xiao Jing’s position on the dominance of men over women, and its
influence in making the Vietnamese family patriarchal. Generally, the status of women was
inferior to that of men. In addition to doing the domestic work, Vietnamese women were also
not allowed to enter certain rooms of the house that were classified as “honourable” (V. Pham
35). Confucius’ Xiao Jing promoted this difference in status by highlighting the importance of
the father, and by explaining primarily patriarchal customs.

The effects of Confucius’ Xiao Jing were felt in the ideological shift of the Vietnamese
family in respect to the parent-child relationship and the husband-wife relationship, but the Xiao
Jing also had profound physical effects on the family. The Xiao Jing’s emphasis on patriarchal
traditions led to patrilocal residence patterns where brides would come live with the husband’s
family (V. Pham 27). The Xiao Jing also indirectly led to the desire for larger families (Dao 18).
Because of the Xiao Jing’s stress on the sons’ duty to achieve glory for the family, Vietnamese
families became larger to gain glory through the works of their sons. Overall, the effects of the *Xiao Jing* extended far beyond affecting the ideological concepts of the Vietnamese family. It also affected the physical structure of the family, by stressing its roots in patriarchy and making the family larger.

Confucius’ teachings, and specifically the words of the *Xiao Jing*, would continue to affect the Vietnamese thought on family for many years until a violent campaign for Vietnamese liberation from all foreign influences, including the Chinese, started in the countryside of northern Vietnam. This revolution was specifically aimed at the French imperialist power and their Japanese allies (Le 43). After various uprisings by different parties, referred to generally as the Viet Minh (T. Pham), the August 1945 Revolution yielded a newly born Democratic Republic of Vietnam with the signing of the *Declaration of Independence* on September 2, 1945 by President Ho Chi Minh (Le 43). However, Communist whisperings in North Vietnam began to threaten Vietnam’s new, fragile democracy. Along with threatening Vietnam’s new democratic standing, traditional characteristics such as the family were also being attacked and slowly replaced as Communist ideology made its way southward.

Although not formally established until the ratification of the 1980 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the Communist ideology of the Vietnamese government began imposing itself on traditional facets of Vietnamese life. In the 35-year period between the formation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the creation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Communists began to change the ideas regarding the family. The Communist ideology of Vietnam is explained within the 1980 Constitution as a “proletarian dictatorship,” where the government must “establish the collective mastery of the working people” (Viet Nam 89). Basically, the entire Communist state of Vietnam collectively owned everyone’s property,
making private ownership an idea of the past. Not only did Communism call for the end of private ownership, it also stripped citizens of their identities, simply labeling them as “collective masters” (Viet Nam 90), “State bodies” (Viet Nam 92), and “State employees” (Viet Nam 92). The idea of the individual no longer exists under this constitution. By ascribing the word “collective” and “State” to the descriptions of Vietnam’s citizens, the government claims that men and women exist only as one unit, one “collective” party under the Communist “State.” The Communists, in essence, owned the Vietnamese people and everything in it. By claiming them as members of the State, the Communist Party was slowly replacing all other ties of social organization with the institution of government.

Functioning under Communist ideology, Vietnam had to reassess itself as a country based on diverse influences, including the Confucian ideas from China. Although the Communists did not directly eradicate Confucian ideals from the Vietnamese family, it slowly began regulating the Vietnamese idea of family, and eventually distanced Confucian ideals from the Vietnamese family. In an effort to replace the ties of the family with ties solely to the government, the new Communist government established laws that would inevitably change the Vietnamese family—namely the Constitution of 1980.

The Vietnamese government first began its regulation of the Vietnamese family by passing the Marriage and Family Law of 1959. Although it was written in a period of growing Communist influence, the Communist overtones were still quite muted. It was not until the actual establishment of Vietnam as a Communist state that one could see the effect of staunchly Communist rhetoric on the Vietnamese family. The 1980 Constitution was established as a firm testament to Communist ideals, and within it, a number of concepts involving the family come to light. First the Constitution defines the family as “the cell of society” and avows that it will
“protect marriage and the family” (Viet Nam 113). This is a surprising rhetorical tool of the Communist party. In none of the previous two Vietnamese constitutions does it even mention family. However, the 1980 Constitution dedicates an entire article to the protection of the family, suggesting that the Communists were intent on regulating the Vietnamese family.

This formal declaration of the regulation of the Vietnamese family comes after decades of growing Communist influence and the establishment of a socialist-minded school system. Even as early as 1927-1928, Ho Chi Minh had planned on establishing school system for Vietnam, “as a means of escape from a colonial culture which kept the people stupid” (Woodside 404). The establishment of this school system was also validated under the 1980 Constitution. In Article 41, it is stated that “the State has sole responsibility for education” (Viet Nam 104). The education of Vietnamese children during the period between 1945 and 1980 were attempts by the growing Communist Party to undermine the familial institutions with Communist ideals. In the communes of the North, children were enrolled in these schools under the guise of “anti-illiteracy programs” that were formally established in 1949-1950 (Woodside 405). However, these organizations were often taught by “communist school teachers” who often imparted Communist ideals to their students in an attempt to have them fully embrace Communism (405). Tram Pham, although she did not attend one of these schools herself, heard extensive stories about these schools and recounts that the children were no longer the family’s children. She says, “They [the children] are being educated by the State; they are being handled by the State; they really actually belong to the State” (T. Pham). The State’s views were being imposed on the children, and the loyalty to the family was instead being replaced by loyalty to the State. Through this government-sanctioned school system, Confucian ideals of loyalty and obedience to the family were being eradicated by mass education, and replaced with Communist ideology.
The Communists further replaced Confucian thought by calling for equal rights between men and women. Instead of the patriarchal family created by the teachings of Confucius, the Communist government established equal rights of men and women in the 1980 Constitution. In Article 63, it states that “women and men have equal rights in all respects—in political, economic, cultural, social and family life” (Viet Nam 113). Within the context of Communist ideology, men and women are equal because they all strive for the betterment of the government. Ho Chi Minh asserts that “if women are not free, half of the nation is not free” (V. Pham 62). In a nation where all citizens were owned by the government, it would be the best interest of the State to give equal rights to women. The government was establishing changes in the domestic front by allowing women to make decisions, hold jobs, and occupy roles previously held by men. However, this liberation of women directly undermined the Confucian institution and the patriarchal system that had defined the Vietnamese family for many centuries.

The Constitution of 1980 was a legal document that profoundly changed the landscape of Vietnamese thought. Shifting drastically from a democratic republic to a socialist republic, the Constitution was filled with pro-Communist rhetoric that yielded pro-Communist ideas. By defining the family, establishing state-sponsored schools, and giving women equal rights, the Constitution of 1980 directly undermined many of the tenets of Confucian thought. Instead of loyalty to the family, the state-sponsored schools taught loyalty to the government (T. Pham). Instead of a society dominated by men, women were given equal rights. These political actions profoundly changed the Vietnamese idea of family by undermining its basic Confucian foundation. This change of ideas led to a physical change of the Vietnamese family—the eventual change from extended family lineages to the nuclear family. Because families no longer sought the glorification of their family name through Confucian practices, families
became smaller. In fact, the average family size of two towns in North Vietnam, where Communist ideology was centralized, was smaller than the average family size of two similar-sized towns in South Vietnam, where Communist ideology had not fully reached (Luong 748). As a result of government action through legislation and the establishment of a staunchly socialist Constitution, the family underwent a structural change into a smaller, nuclear unit.

The changes of the Communist Party were noticeable, even to the extent of the size of the family. However, a few refugees were able to escape from Vietnam, mostly citizens of South Vietnam. Tram Pham was one of the nearly 135,000 refugees that fled from Vietnam as Saigon fell (Vietnamese Refugees). In order to escape from the Communist ideology, refugees sometimes even resorted to risky and uncertain escape plans. However, Pham and many others managed to escape Vietnam before they were influenced by Communist ideology, and in essence still retain their Confucian-influenced ideas about family. As the first Vietnamese refugees were transported to four military bases in California, Arkansas, Pennsylvania, and Florida (Vietnamese Refugees), Vietnamese communities began to grow, specifically the community of Little Saigon in Orange County. As these settlements grew with their roots grounded in Vietnamese thought and tradition, Vietnamese refugees, although far from losing their Vietnamese identities, were slowly adapting some of their ideas to become more similar to American ideas—one such idea being the structure and identity of the family.

The Vietnamese idea of family was slowly replaced by the American idea of family—a nuclear family based on true, emotional bonds that encouraged two-way communication and a certain amount of individuality among its members. A major reason for this change could just simply have been attributed to time, time for the Vietnamese refugees to engage in an exchange of ideas with Americans. Although time was probably a factor for the transition of one form of

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3 Tram Pham’s mother-in-law was arrested thirteen separate times by the Communists before she was able to escape from Vietnam.

4 The military base located in California is Camp Pendleton, located near the coast of southern California. This is the base through which Tram Pham came into the United States.
family to another, pamphlets and booklets that were distributed among Vietnamese refugees held American ideas that influenced the Vietnamese idea of family. In a pamphlet given to Vietnamese refugees called *Your New Country: A guide to language and life in the U.S.A.*, the “typical American family” is described as “a husband, wife, and their children” (18). It goes on to say that “grandparents, uncles and aunts, and other relatives usually live in their own homes apart from the immediate family” (18). Considering that these refugees escaped Communist influence and still harbored Confucian thoughts on the family, these pamphlets held ideas different from their own. The nuclear family, of only “a husband, wife, and children,” differs significantly from the extended family lineages of the past. Not only did time eventually change the Vietnamese perceptions of family, the American government was immediately imposing the American family structure on these new Vietnamese refugees through these adjustment pamphlets.

Another booklet distributed to Vietnamese refugees called *Living with an American Family* made similar claims about the American family, but focused more on the ideology and roles of the American family. In the chapter entitled “Structure of the American Family,” it opens with a description of the American family as functioning “in a much more democratic fashion than the families you have been accustomed to” (*Living 1*). By opening this chapter with such a description, the author sets up an opposition between the Vietnamese family as undemocratic and the American family as democratic. Although in most cases Vietnamese families were less democratic than American ones, this opening statement criticizes the Vietnamese idea of family and sets the American idea of family as the desired standard, as the desired goal that Vietnamese families should reach. The pamphlets also provided strategies to reach the desired standard of the American family: the equalization of the husband and wife, and
the equalization of children no matter the age (1). With respect to the husband-wife relationship, the pamphlet says that “most major decisions are made after discussion by both parents” and stresses that the mother may do jobs “that are sometimes considered men’s work” (1). This equality between men and women, although a strongly accepted tenet of American thought, conflicts strongly with the Confucian-influenced ideas of patriarchy. In addition to the conflicts over the husband-wife relationship, the booklet also emphasizes the importance of equality among the children without paying attention to age (1). This disregard for age and its assumed authority also differs from traditional Confucian ideas derived from the *Xiao Jing*. Finally, the booklet states that “American children are encouraged to be independent and to make many of their own decisions at an early age” (1). Independence and individualism are basically foreign concepts to Vietnamese refugees where their identity is based on the family (Le 27). The booklet points out many supposed “inadequacies” of the Vietnamese family, and offers the alternative—the typical American family.

Although many of the characteristics of the American family were new to the Vietnamese refugees, and directly contradicted the Confucian-influenced ideas of the current Vietnamese family, the Vietnamese slowly adopted the ideas of the American family because they strove for the American ideal. As Tram Pham aptly put it, she viewed America as “heaven on Earth,” “a democratic nation where everyone was equal” (T. Pham). Vietnamese families accepted these foreign concepts of the American family because of its strong ties to democracy—the desired governing principle that they came for (T. Pham). The acceptance of these American values occurred as a result of acculturation. Consequently, these American values have changed the Vietnamese family into a family very similar to the American one.
The structure of the Vietnamese family came to model the American family by adopting the standard nuclear family of a husband, wife, and their children. In her interview, Tram Pham recalls that her family “was placed in three separate sponsor families from the Diocese of Orange” in southern California (T. Pham). However, after a month, they were settled into a new apartment. When asked who resided in this apartment, Pham responded that “only [her] immediate family lived in this two-bedroom apartment” (T. Pham). Although not nearly as dramatic as the rhetoric of some of the distributed pamphlets, this living arrangement set by the government imposed the idea of the nuclear family on Vietnamese refugees by settling immediate families together, not extended families.

The effect of American society on the Vietnamese family did not stop at the structure, but also extended to the ideology of the family. The Vietnamese family began accepting women’s equal status as a result of labor. According to Duc Ba Pham, Vietnamese refugees experienced identity changes as the “result of a lower social status,” the impoverished status that came as a result of escaping Vietnam and starting over in America (15). According to Tram Pham’s interview, her father had to accept a job that was considered socially inferior to positions he had in Vietnam. Because of this “lower social status,” both Pham’s mother and father had to work to make a steady income. Because Vietnamese women began working, their equality began to become established (Dao 23). Another idea of the American family that had to be translated to the Vietnamese family was this idea of individuality and a de-emphasis on age as a sign of authority. Although Pham was raised in a traditional Vietnamese family, she praised the American belief of equality and individuality by incorporating it into her own parenting style. She says, “I think I am much more open [than my parents]. I encourage two-way communication…[and] give my children much more liberty than I ever had been given” (T.
Pham). Pham also emphasized the building of real relationships with her children, relationships based on trust and openness and not forced obedience and respect (T. Pham). Pham accepted these ideas of equality and openness into her own parenting style as a tribute to American ideas and American democracy, and as a result of acculturation and assimilation into American culture. Although Pham accepts these “democratic” values, others—particularly of the older generation—still did not because they were considered “antithetical to their established beliefs” grounded in Confucian teaching (Diep 8). However, as time continues, these values will become incorporated into the Vietnamese family because the “level of acculturation increases with time spent in the dominant culture” (qtd. in Dao 10). These values of equality, openness, and liberty are strong ideals associated with America and the American family, and will soon become translated into the core of the Vietnamese family if it has not yet been done. American society had and will continue to have a profound effect on the Vietnamese concept of family, changing it from a patriarchal structure to a more gender-equitable structure and changing it from a strict, ceremonial structure to a structure that emphasizes open relationships built on equality.

The Vietnamese family has been the product of numerous influences, always emerging slightly different in form and ideology. However, as the Vietnamese culture has been able to retain the integrity of its traditions, vestiges of the Vietnamese family’s past remain a part of the Vietnamese family’s identity. An intrinsic respect for elders, the desire for collective success among the family, the purported strictness of “Asian” parents—all of these can be traced back to the traditions and ideology surrounding past ideas of the Vietnamese family. As the Vietnamese population continues to grow in communities such as Little Saigon, the ideas surrounding the Vietnamese family will continuously evolve, changing as a result of new ideology, assimilation, political rhetoric, religious rhetoric, and even traditional views of the family.
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