

# **WATERBORNE: Vietnamese Australians and river environments in Vietnam and Sydney**

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## **Abstract**

Vietnamese Australians who arrived in Australia as refugees since the 1970s and later as migrants, have developed complex relationships of remembering, knowing and belonging to environments in Vietnam and Sydney. Water was a frequent point of reference in our interviews with Vietnamese people in Sydney, and their relationships with water are used in this article to explore interviewees' associations with places. The article focuses on cultural knowledge of environments, which people bring with them, such as their connections with rivers and oceans, central to both memories of place and the histories of Vietnam. These memories also change with return visits and experiences between these places. Vietnamese refugees' experiences of escape and trauma coming across oceans from Vietnam also influence subsequent relationships with place. Finally, relationships with Sydney parks and urban waterways are explored by examining popular places for family and community get-togethers along Georges River, located near where many Sydney Vietnamese people live. These have become key places in making Sydney home for Vietnamese people. The article considers how Vietnamese Australian cultural knowledge of place could be shared and acknowledged by park managers and used in park interpretation.

## **Introduction**

Vietnamese Australians who arrived in Australia as refugees since the 1970s and later as migrants, have developed complex relationships of remembering, knowing and belonging to environments in Vietnam and Sydney. Water was a frequent point of reference in our interviews with Vietnamese people in Sydney, and their relationships with water are used in this article to explore interviewees' associations with places. The article focuses on cultural knowledge of environments, which people bring with them,

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such as their connections with rivers and oceans, central to both memories of place and the histories of Vietnam. These memories also change with return visits and experiences between these places. Vietnamese refugees' experiences of escape and trauma coming across oceans from Vietnam also influence subsequent relationships with place. Finally, relationships with Sydney parks and urban waterways are explored by examining popular places for family and community get-togethers along Georges River, located near where many Sydney Vietnamese people live. These have become key places in making Sydney home for Vietnamese people. The article considers how Vietnamese Australian cultural knowledge of place could be shared and acknowledged by park managers and used in park interpretation.

### *Background and method*

This article is based upon interviews with approximately 65 people of Vietnamese background conducted from 2002-2009. These interviews and discussions were completed for the Parklands Culture and Communities project, which investigated how cultural diversity shapes people's understandings and use of the Georges River and open spaces in Sydney's southwest.<sup>2</sup> Fifteen people were interviewed in-depth, with several people re-interviewed on several occasions. Community researchers completed seven interviews. Project staff completed other shorter interviews and informal discussions, often during activities suggested by interviewees such as shopping in Cabramatta and sharing homemade phở. Discussion of family photos of interviewees in parks was often part of the interviews. Four focus groups discussions were completed: with Vietnamese Australians aged twenty to thirty at Mirambeena Park in 2002 and another group in 2004. Focus groups of 2007 were completed at the homes of an interviewee in Chipping Norton and another group at a Georges Hall interviewee's home. The majority of these interviewees were thirty years of age and upwards, with children. Other research strategies included attending cultural festivals such as Tet (Vietnamese New Year) at Warwick Farm and at Phuoc Hue temple in Wetherill Park to observe interactions, use of space and cultural practices.

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<sup>2</sup> Parklands Culture and Communities ARC Linkage, Chief Investigator, Professor. Heather Goodall, Adjunct Professor Denis Byrne of NSW Department of Environment and Climate Change and Associate Professor Stephen Wearing (UTS). Dr Johanna Kijas was the initial research associate.

## Parks and cultural diversity

Similar changes to those in urban Sydney are facing park managers in the US and UK where there are also diverse park users who often have different approaches to the environment to those anticipated by park management. Setha Low, who has looked at public space and parklands access in the US, has explored these issues most comprehensively.<sup>3</sup> Low's work indicates that public spaces like parklands can offer opportunities for active expression of citizenship, as exploratory and recreative spaces and places to experience cultural diversity. They can be places where people learn to relate to a new environment and support and affirm cultural communities, though they can also be spaces of major cross-cultural tension. Greg Noble has argued that 'exploratory gestures' such as sharing food (as often occurs in picnics at parks) are significant acts of everyday multiculturalism, the process and work of building connections between people and community. In Sydney parks, people of different backgrounds interact and initiate discussion through activities like fishing, barbequing and sport or games.<sup>4</sup>

More specifically, our work builds upon that of anthropologist Mandy Thomas, commissioned by NSW DECC, in recognition of changing visitation of urban national parks. Thomas investigated Vietnamese peoples relationships with national parks in Australia. She drew attention to Vietnamese people's spatial and sensual experiences of Vietnam, which were contrasted with Australian experiences and explored their knowledge of densely populated and spiritually imbued places and traditions of pilgrimages. Debates around fishing and intensive productive uses of environments, which are often seen by Vietnamese people to be improved upon by people, were investigated in Thomas' study. Our study differs from Thomas' by extending beyond national parks to include council parks. It focuses on particular associations and symbols and the implications of refugee and personal histories in more depth than was possible in Thomas' important study.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, work in leisure studies, such as M. Stodolska and J. Livengood (2004) Effects of discrimination and constraints on the behaviour of American Muslims post September 11 in American, *Journal of Leisure Research*, v36, n2 pp183-2-8; M. Floyd (1999) Race Ethnicity and Use of the National Park System, *Social Science Research Review*, pp1-24; P. Gobster, (2002) Managing Urban Parks for a Racially and Ethnically Diverse Clientele' *Leisure Sciences*, 24, pp 143-159 suggests; and in the UK the work of landscape designers like C. Rishbeth (2001) Ethnic minority groups and the design of public open space, *Landscape Research*, 26 (4) pp351-366.

<sup>4</sup> G. Noble, (2009) Everyday Cosmopolitanism and the labour of Intercultural Community, in *Everyday Multiculturalism* eds Amanda Wise and Selvaraj Velayutham, Palgrave Macmillan, London. –

By looking at water symbolism, this paper acknowledges that, as anthropologist Veronica Strang suggests, there are strong connections in the ways people value water across the world, and so there is potential for cross-cultural studies. Yet the particular ways in which these meanings are reinvented, and either valued or ignored when cultural contexts change, are still worthy of attention. This is especially vital in relation to refugee and migration experiences, which differ significantly from Strang's examples of the Kowanyama Indigenous community of Cape York in far North Queensland, Australia and Dorset in southern England.<sup>5</sup>

Like the Georges River, Vietnamese memories and knowledges are tidal, moving back and forth across time and place. Cultural knowledge of place moves between Vietnam and Sydney – it is influenced by return travel, stories told and other physical and cultural cues.

*Why explore Vietnamese relationships to rivers and parks?*

Vietnamese Australians form a large proportion of the population in southwest Sydney, concentrated in areas such as Cabramatta and Fairfield near the Georges River parks. Nearly 40% of NSW Vietnamese speakers live in this area and they are the largest group of the overseas born residents in Fairfield.<sup>6</sup>

They have been frequent users of the parks since the late 1970s to early 1980s as neighbours and visitors. Public friction and conflict with natural resource managers and other fishers has arisen over their fishing and park use, due to different approaches to environments and resources.

Often parks are managed on mono-cultural presumptions of what people value in environments, as Thomas has indicated.<sup>7</sup> Yet residential patterns have changed in Sydney and not all of these park users consider parks the same way as park managers have tended to. Vietnamese Australians have rich connections to environments here and abroad, which can be used to look after environments everywhere.

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<sup>5</sup> V. Strang (2004) *The Meaning of Water*, Oxford: Berg also (2005) Common Senses: water, sensory experience and the generation of meaning, *Journal of Material Culture*, 10 (1) 92-120.

<sup>6</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census 2001 and 2006.

<sup>7</sup> M. Thomas (2002) *Moving Landscapes National Parks and the Vietnamese experience*, DEC, p3,24.

## Waterborne homelands: Water cultures and rivers in Vietnam

Vietnamese people living in Sydney did not arrive here empty of experiences or knowledge of nature or devoid of history. What they did know and how they came to be here deserves some further consideration.

Significant numbers of Vietnamese people began to arrive in Australia after the fall of Saigon in 1975, which marked the end of the American War. Though the focus of much Australian writing about Vietnam, the American War was one of many wars and invasions experienced by the Vietnamese people. In nationalist histories of Vietnam, Vietnam's independence is represented as being struggled for in the face of invasions from China, their giant neighbour to the north, followed by French colonists from 1883, Japanese occupation in WW2 and then the 'American' War.

After independence struggles against the French forces from 1945-1954, Vietnam was a divided country with a communist democratic republic in the north and a capitalist republic in the South. Some Vietnamese Australians, who are mostly from the south, still carry grievances against northern people.

US forces moved into the Vietnam in 1965 after a gradual build up of military presence, and the war between the US and Ho Chi Minh's forces which followed, caused enormous damage to both people and the environment. The south was 'liberated' or 'fell' in 1975 and the country was reunited again under Ho Chi Minh.

Life became increasingly difficult for South Vietnamese government associated people and for Vietnamese with Chinese ancestry. They began to leave after the socialist government closed private businesses in 1979.<sup>8</sup> Many refugees fled by boat and plane making the difficult decision to leave their home. The very idea of leaving the country altogether was new to Vietnamese people, argues author Andrew Lam, who fled with his family to the US when he was eleven. People expected to live and die in the land of their ancestors.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> M. Thomas, 1999, *Dreams in the Shadows: Vietnamese Australian lives in transition*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, p19-21

<sup>9</sup> A. Lam (2005), Talks about the Fall of Saigon and discussion forum with Dai Le, Liverpool Regional Museum, 30 April 2005. This is a striking difference with the history Chinese of people in Australia, China having a history of migration abroad.

While many people died trying to escape by boat, some made it to refugee camps in Hong Kong, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia and eventually to Europe, America, Canada and Australia. Networks have grown between Vietnamese people who were refugees in camps together, and links remain strong between these communities.

Many Vietnamese Australians have grown up here, and some people were born here. For a younger generation born in Australia, experiences of environment are often different to those of their parents. People have returned to visit family more recently since the Vietnamese government developed a policy of *doi moi* (renovation) after 1985 and they remain firmly connected with Vietnam.

While the very term Vietnamese might seem self-explanatory, it encompasses much diversity. In Vietnam there are 54 ethnic groups with differences between people in rural and urban areas and across cultural groups. There have been clashes between mountain minorities such as the Montagnards and the lowland majority (Kinh people) before and after the American war. In Australia, there are differences between the experiences of those who came as refugees and migrants or between those who came who are of Chinese ancestry and those of Hmong background. The term ‘Vietnamese’ is like a net – much difference is caught within it.

Beyond experiences of war and departure, Vietnamese people’s histories are also shaped by the geography and environment they lived in. A long coastline and numerous rivers shape Vietnam, with one appearing approximately every 20km and water is prevalent. This is seen in stories of how the Vietnamese landscape was made and its people came to be there, most of which involve the ancestral dragon, which brings rain and is associated with waterways. For example, Ha Long Bay means dragon landing, a reference to the mother dragon coming to earth and creating island barriers to ward off northern invaders. These dragon stories also explain the importance of wet rice agriculture and links between different groups such as highlanders and lowlanders.

The Mekong delta in the tropical south is known as Cửu Long or nine dragons, as the nine branches of the river head into the sea, bringing water and fertile soils along the way. Vietnamese words for country also show connections with rivers. The phrase Đất

nuóc meaning homeland in Vietnamese consists of the words land and water, while non sông a Vietnamese term for country is composed of the words for mountain and river.<sup>10</sup> Water and rivers are central to how Vietnam is known. Connections to ancestors are important aspects of Vietnamese relationships with place too. Shrines are found all over Vietnam including some for offerings to Gods of sea and mountains as well as ancestors. Many Sydney Vietnamese people have shrines in their homes, gardens and businesses and maintain their connection with ancestors.<sup>11</sup>

Historically in Vietnam, land, water and trees were regarded as having spirits and the natural world as having both seen and unseen dimensions. Such ideas are (arguably) still influential as are Buddhist beliefs according to environmental scientist Le Trong Cuc.<sup>12</sup> He has argued that environmentalists working in Vietnam could use these beliefs in developing relevant education programs, rather than using imported environment concepts. Historian David Biggs has stated that the Vietnamese used their local knowledge of U Minh forests and rivers of the south through the American war and they have close cultural associations with it, which are often overlooked by NGO environmentalists.<sup>13</sup> Recognizing this knowledge and history could help rather than hinder environmental work in Vietnam.

Rivers feature in the extensive history of spoken poetry in Vietnam and in folk art and appear frequently as places of intimate connection, reflection and exile in written poetry collections.<sup>14</sup> This tradition has continued in Australia with some interviewees writing about their experiences of homesickness here in relation to the Georges River. In Vietnamese songs and poems waterways are populated with boats and fishermen, the land with huts and farmers tending fields. Relationships between people and environment are recognised and valued. Nature and culture are not positioned as

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<sup>10</sup> H. Ngoc, (2004) *Wandering through Vietnamese Culture*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition, first published 1995 ed. HaNoi: The Gioi Publishers, p555, 1055. Remarkd upon by writer A. Lam, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> M. Thomas, (1999) p65-67

<sup>12</sup> T. H. Dinh, (2003) Social sciences and biodiversity - connections between the global the local in Viet Nam. *International Social Science Journal* 55 (4); L.T. Cuc (1999) Vietnamese traditional cultural concepts of human relations with the natural environment. *Asian Geographer: a Geographical Journal on Asia and the Pacific Rim Special Issue: Eco-Consciousness in Asia and the Pacific* 18 (1-2)

<sup>13</sup> D. Biggs, (2006) Managing a rebel landscape: Conservation Pioneers and the Revolutionary Past in the U Minh Forest, Vietnam *Environmental History*, 10 (3), last accessed 10 Jan 2006.

<sup>14</sup> N.B. Nguyen (ed and trans) (1975) (trans with Burton Raffel and WS Merwin), *A Thousand Years of Vietnamese Poetry*, Alfred A Knopf, New York , p116

absolutes, separate from each other but known more fluidly and contextually.<sup>15</sup> Knowing nature through productive uses rather than abstract admiration is a powerful cultural means of relating to nature, which does not vanish when Vietnamese people have left their country of origin.<sup>16</sup> Since the Vietnamese have primarily been a rural, agricultural people, though the population is increasingly urbanized now, rural associations are still strong – especially apparent at Tet (Vietnamese New Year) when city people are expected to return to their home villages.<sup>17</sup>

Some Sydney based interviewees had idyllic memories of Vietnam as a place and its cultural history. Vinh Nguyen who emigrated from Hanoi to Australia to study TESOL in 1987 originally worked as a teacher, said:

The literature was always talking about the beautiful nature, the good things about it and they described the river as sort of happiness and wealth, as my wife said. It brought us all the soil and... it waters all the fields...it gave us good crops.<sup>18</sup>

Several interviewees mentioned their hometown river's historical and cultural importance. Thanh Hue Nguyenphoc, who was born by the Huong/Perfume River, was a schoolteacher in Hue and gave birth to her daughter just nine days before the intense bombing of the Tet Offensive (1968). She recalled children swimming in the river after school, lush plants by the river and its beauty. Vinh and Kim Nguyen, who worked as translators and language teachers in Hanoi, also spoke of the famous river associated with their hometown: the To Lich and the Red River of Hanoi. The rivers were spoken of as being central to these places, and defining them.

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<sup>15</sup> O. Brunn and A. Kalland, (1996) (eds) *Asian Perceptions of Nature: a critical approach*, Curzon, p11-12

<sup>16</sup> V.T. T. Pham & T. Rambo (2003), 'Environmental Consciousness: the case of Vietnam' *Journal of South East Asian Studies*, 41 (1) 76-100. They note the prevalence of utilitarian and resource based models for understanding environment in their Hanoi based study.p96

<sup>17</sup> B. T. Huynh-Beattie, interviewed by A.Cadzow, 21 July 2006.

<sup>18</sup> K. and V.Nguyen interviewed by Allison Cadzow, 12 July 2005, 19 August 2005. See *Gold and Silver* for more of this families stories and photographs  
<http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/goldandsilver/index.shtml>



**Thanh Hue revisiting her hometown, by the Perfume River, Hue, 2005**  
**Thanh Hue collection.**

River pollution was a major concern for interviewees and showed both the growth of environmental knowledge developed while living in Australia and recognition of Vietnam's rapid industrialization from return visits. Vietnamese Australians are bringing these environmental histories together. People's bodies are physically marked by environmental damage too. Relatives of some interviewees living in Vietnam were dying of cancers, which they attributed to Agent Orange. The American War certainly left a damaged environment, destroying forest cover and food sources. No regrowth has occurred in large areas due to dioxin damage, though some argue most damage to the environment has been caused by massive development and population growth after the war.<sup>19</sup>

Younger interviewees recalled cityscapes such as the busy markets of Cho Lon, the Chinese district of Saigon and the urban parts of the Mekong River. For young people who grew up in Australia, urban rivers in Vietnam can be a surprise. Huy Pham who left Saigon with his family in 1988 when he was nine years old recalled:

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<sup>19</sup> See E.J. Sterling, M. M. Hurley, and Le Duc Minh (2006.) *Vietnam: a natural history*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press; L. T Can, and V. Quy (1994) Vietnam: Environmental issues and possible solutions, *Asian Journal of Environmental Management*, 2, (2) 69-77; M. Di Gregorio, T.A Rambo, and M. Yanagisawa (2003) Clean, Green and Beautiful: Environment and Development under the Renovation Economy, in *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society* (ed) H. V. Luong. New York, Oxford, Singapore for information on damage caused by the American war.

The river over there ... it's...dirty and smelly (laughs) it's not like the Georges River here in Bankstown. You really can't fish over there. You wouldn't want to eat anything that you fish out of the river, because people do all sorts of things in the river, ... they bathe in the river, they wash their clothes, and occasionally they go to the toilet in the river as well.<sup>20</sup>

This also gives an idea of the standards people measure the Australian environment by, and the relative nature of appraisal of environments.<sup>21</sup>

For Thanh Hue, the Nguyens and younger people like Huy Pham, return visits to Vietnam are a chance to meet up with family. This is a major reason for many Sydney Vietnamese people's return visits.<sup>22</sup> Often younger Vietnamese Australian's memories of Vietnam were about what they had seen on return visits more recently, especially if they left when they were very young. Stories of before leaving and after leaving flow into each other. Even places 'known' before have changed dramatically with population growth and industrialisation. Vietnam can be almost as unfamiliar as many places in Sydney were when they arrived initially.

### **Waterborne: Vietnamese refugee experiences**

More than a million people are estimated to have left Vietnam, often as refugees in traumatic circumstances since 1975.<sup>23</sup> Fleeing from the country by boat has further shaped their responses to environments. People risked jail and re-education camps if they were caught attempting to leave and often people couldn't even say goodbye to family members for fear of informers sabotaging their plans. Huy Pham escaped with his mother after seven attempts, fearing for their future as Huy's father was involved with the Southern Vietnamese navy. They escaped on a small, overcrowded fishing boat, with inadequate equipment, fuel and water, as did many others. The number of refugees who died at sea is not known, but estimates range from 100, 000 to a million.

<sup>20</sup> H. Pham interview, 2005. For more of Huy's story and photos see *Gold and Silver: Vietnamese migration and relationships with environments in Vietnam and Sydney*, (2006) <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/goldandsilver/homeland/pham.shtml>

See also Thomas (2002) pp40-41 regarding younger peoples memories of Vietnam.

<sup>21</sup> Kylie Walker response, DECC cultural heritage conference, 5 June 2007 in relation to environmental education work with Sudanese refugees.

<sup>22</sup> T.H. Nguyen, B. King B, and L. Turner (2003) Travel Behaviour and Migrant cultures: the Vietnamese in Australia, *Tourism Culture and Communication*, 4 (2) Jan, 95-107;

<sup>23</sup> M. Thomas, (2005), 'Vietnamese in Australia', eds Melvin Ember, Carol Ember and Ian Skoggard, *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: immigrant and refugee cultures around the world*, v2, Springer, New York.

<sup>24</sup> Some died of dehydration or drowning, while others experienced terrifying pirate attacks and rape. Huy, at the age of nine, survived a harrowing journey before he eventually made it to Thailand. He narrowly escaped being burnt in an accident on board the tiny boat, and recalled:

... even though I was young, I could still have some fear...because you're in the water, you look left, right and back in front and you don't see any land, you don't see any buildings, you don't see anyone. It's just you and a dozen more people and a fishing boat on the open sea.<sup>25</sup>

Other accounts of Vietnamese refugees now living in Australia recall similar anxiety, and the sense of being at the mercy of the sea and natural forces.<sup>26</sup>

Narratives of escape by sea are central to how people have represented themselves and their community, though some people are unable to speak about their experiences at all. Refugee accounts of escape form a major part of many Vietnamese Australian oral and written histories. As Nathalie Chau Nguyen explained in her study of Vietnamese women refugees memories: 'Water...connotes life and death, home and exile. It is associated with the defining narrative of the Vietnamese diaspora: the escape by sea.'<sup>27</sup>

At a Vietnamese Community in Australia exhibition commemorating 30 years in Australia (2005) many objects were loaned by former refugees, which related to escaping. Pictures of boats and religious figures that 'protected' them at sea were especially evocative and had literally worn the journey.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> N. Chau Nguyen (2009) *Memory is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese diaspora*, California, Prager, p4

<sup>25</sup> H. Pham interviewed by Allison Cadzow, 5 June 2005.

<sup>26</sup> For example Ninh Nguyen (born Hanoi but lived in Saigon) who escaped Vietnam in the 1980s, and now lives in Greenacre, South west Sydney said "when you were steering you could see the boat and it just looked like a little leaf in the middle of a big bowl of black ink ...you could see a big wave and its coming up on you, And you could hear the body of the timber boat groan under the weight of the wave when it dropped onto the boat. I will never forget that" T.Carroll, ed. (2001) *Oral history of Bankstown*, Bankstown Youth Development Service, p48

<sup>27</sup> N. Chau Nguyen (2009) p5; The Migration Heritage Centre NSW and the State Library of NSW have collections of recorded oral histories with Vietnamese Australians, while published works such as L. Hawthorne (1982) *Refugee: the Vietnamese Experience* Melbourne: Oxford University Press and Nguyen, N.Chau Nguyen (2005) *Voyage of Hope Vietnamese Australian Women's Narratives*, Melbourne: Common Ground and (2009) are based upon interviews. See also family biographies such as K. Huynh (2007) *Where the Sea Takes us: A Vietnamese Australian Story*, Harper Collins.

<sup>28</sup> Vietnamese Community in Australia exhibition, Marrickville Library, Campsie Library, 2005



**A water damaged religious image, carried during the journey by a Vietnamese refugee, Vietnamese Community in Australia exhibition, Campsie Library, 2005. (Allison Cadzow)**

Time spent in refugee camps was often associated with boredom, illness, anxiety and restriction. This was when being in-between places deeply affected people. They were not able to rebuild their lives yet, and were grieving for people left behind and their former life in Vietnam. Monuments have since been erected at several of the refugee camps recognizing these experiences.

Water can be seen as a means to freedom and escape for these refugees, yet it can also hold other complex meanings for Vietnamese deeply affected by their experiences. For some refugees it can be threatening unless contained and even the sight of boats on

Sydney Harbour can trigger unease.<sup>29</sup> For others, the calm water of the Georges River has healing associations connected with practices like fishing.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to relocation trauma, people also experienced racial harassment and prejudice on arrival in Australia, aggravated by the recessions in the late 1980s. At the beginning of 1975 only 1300 Vietnamese people lived in Australia, but by late 1999, 224 000 people of Vietnamese origin were living in Australia, many in Sydney and Melbourne.<sup>31</sup> It was a sudden and visible population change and signaled the end of the infamous 'White Australia' Policy, officially abolished in 1973.<sup>32</sup> Backlashes towards multiculturalism also affected Vietnamese communities.

Most people arriving in Sydney after 1978 focused on finding work or starting school, learning a new language and saving for a house, starting to regain some of the security they had lost. Yet as Leandro Mendes, who runs the innovative Operation Blue Tongue program, which introduces refugees to Australian environments has pointed out, we can't presume that the environment is a low priority for refugees. He has found that when people are given the opportunity, they want to experience their new environment and learn more about it.<sup>33</sup>

Finding out about the new environment they were living in was an important part of starting to feel more settled in Australia and making memories beyond the refugee camp. These experiences have influenced their responses to Australian environments and open spaces.

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<sup>29</sup> V.L. Tran (b. 1966) from Nha Trang (coast mid Vietnam), spent time in Phillipines refugee camp once he escaped. "Water is a central theme of Linh's garden. Water still holds great fears for him because of his experience of leaving Vietnam. He says that when you look at the sea from the safety of the shore it appears very beautiful, but when seen from a refugee boat it was very dark and threatening, Even now when he sees the boats come in at Circular Quay it disturbs him." Fairfield City Museum & Gallery (2004). *Culture & Cultivation: backyards in Fairfield*. Fairfield Community Museum & Gallery: Fairfield p40

<sup>30</sup> B. T. Hunyh Beattie, discussion with A. Cadzow 22 August 2006

<sup>31</sup> M.V. Tranh (2001) 'Vietnamese' in James Jupp (ed) (2001) *The Australian People*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne p728

<sup>32</sup> N. Viviani, (1996) *The Indo Chinese in Australia 1975-1995: From Burnt Boats to Barbeques*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne p7

<sup>33</sup> L. Mendes, (2008) 'Operation Blue Tongue: immigrants, nature and belonging', presentation to *Cities, Nature Justice* symposium, 10 December 2008, UTS, edited transcript this volume.

Dai Le, escaped from Saigon as a child with her mother and siblings in 1975, arriving in Wollongong in 1979 at the age of eleven. She is now a journalist, independent filmmaker, and Liberal party candidate for Cabramatta. As a child, she associated the open green spaces parks and coastline of NSW with freedom, as did her family, after spending four years in refugee camps in Hong Kong and the Philippines.<sup>34</sup> Le recalled that, as children, they were ‘constantly’ being taken to the Sydney’s Botanical Gardens during the first years of resettlement in Australia. Building new shared memories, helped to make places become significant. As Riley has argued, what happens in a place is as important as the place itself in the growth of connection to landscapes.<sup>35</sup>

However, the psychological consequences of being a refugee live on for some people. Camping can have negative associations for some interviewees who experienced ‘re-education’ camps and refugee camps. ‘T’\* a young woman who was jailed for repeat attempts at escape from Vietnam, thought of camping in terms of instability rather than recreation. After fleeing and nights spent anxiously hiding, her own bed in a safe space is understandably crucial to her.<sup>36</sup> Some women in southwest Sydney have been confronting their fear of water through therapeutic swimming lessons designed especially for Vietnamese refugees, which aim to gradually restore their sense of safety in and around water.<sup>37</sup>

### **Waterborne: relationships with water and parks in Sydney**

Water is the key element of attraction in the local parks for Vietnamese people, especially since parts of the Georges River remind people of Vietnam. The calm reaches of the river and the placid waters of lakes are especially popular. While some

<sup>34</sup> Documentary films Dai Le has written and directed relating to Vietnamese experience in Australia include: *Operation Babylift*, 2005 Film Australia, (National Interest Program, 52 min documentary, screened on SBS TV) SBS TV, *In Limbo* 2001 (Film Finance Corporation/SBS, 52-mins documentary, screened on SBS TV) Producer/Director/ ABC TV, 1997 *Taking Charge of Cabramatta* 52-mins documentary, screened on SBS TV

<sup>35</sup> R. Riley, (1992) Attachment to the Ordinary Landscape in *Place Attachment*, (ed) A.. Irwin and S. Low: Plenum Press, New York, pp19-20

<sup>36</sup> Camping can have negative associations too for Vietnam Veterans, bringing up war memories. discussion with B.T. Beattie, 22 August 2006. Thi (pseudonym)\* informal interview, 28 Jan 2006

<sup>37</sup> C. Levett, (2009) Trauma survivors face their fears in the shallow end, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 January.

interviewees liked to go to the beach to view the water, surfing and swimming were rarely mentioned as appealing.

Cuong Le, a curator who came to study in Australia from Hanoi when he was in his 20s, suggests that Vietnamese people feel very close to rivers, which were sources of transport, livelihoods and spirituality for many people. They grew up by them and are more interested in finding places like those rivers of memory, than in being in less familiar places like bush landscapes.<sup>38</sup>

Boi Tran Huynh-Beattie, an art historian and curator who came to Sydney in 2001 to complete her doctoral studies, saw connections between the rivers in southern Vietnam and southwest Sydney. She said: “I love Georges River which reminds me of Dong Nai River in Vietnam where I was born and lived for most of my life before migrating to Australia”.<sup>39</sup> She also associated driving crossing Alfords Point Bridge, to visit friends with freedom, the land and river evoking powerful responses.

Familiar environmental features are sought by some interviewees in choosing where to gather with family in parks. Bach, a 73-year-old grandmother from southern Vietnam, now living in Bankstown favoured the ‘waterlillies pond’, which is fringed with willows at Lake Gillawarna because it reminded her of Vietnam. Ponds with water lillies are a common sight in Vietnam and the lotus/water lily is associated with purity of the soul in Buddhist culture, so it has strong symbolic resonance for Vietnamese people.<sup>40</sup> This place is also often heavily visited on weekends-which is another reminder of Vietnam, the presence of crowds of people being an attraction also.

Huy Pham articulated the many different ways water is important for Vietnamese people:

...in Vietnamese culture, we think of water as life, it’s calming...The river is a big part of Vietnamese culture because in rural areas, people use the water from the river for the rice fields...so there’s that connection of the river, and also the land and the rice fields there. To some people when they look at the river it

<sup>38</sup> C. Le, discussion with A.Cadzow, 11 February 2005. See also Thao Nguyen’s lyrical account of visiting the river her family lived by in M.Thomas, 2002, p47-8

<sup>39</sup> B.T. Huynh-Beattie, email communication, and interviewed by A.Cadzow, 21 July 2006.

<sup>40</sup> Bach and Nuoi interviewed by A.. Phan, October 2002

makes them feel a bit at home...it reminds them of their memories in Vietnam. The river is a big part of our life and that's why a lot of people do fishing.<sup>41</sup>

Riverside barbeques were an important part of his family's early experiences of Sydney, though as Dai Le pointed out, barbeques in parks are not typical in Vietnam. It is something that is a distinctly Vietnamese Australian, or as Thomas explains it, an 'intercultural creation'.<sup>42</sup> The Georges River National Park is a place where families can fish, enjoy sitting on the grass, being outdoors and family togetherness. This ritual tends to continue, with extended family groups, of uncles, aunts and cousins gathering together. Family picnics and barbeques were mentioned as the main reason for park visits among Vietnamese interviewees.

Water seems to achieve a new significance for Vietnamese in Australian parks and gardens, perhaps because Australia is a dry place compared to Vietnam. Members of a focus group picnic in 2004 at Garrison Point, Mirambeena, said:

'I think the water features in the park make it more enticing. You go to the park and if you see a river running through it ...you think that might be a bit more beautiful. If it was just a park with some trees...'<sup>43</sup>

Water is an important element and its presence influences decisions on where to gather, picnic and spend time.

Thanh Hue chose to take visiting friends from Vietnam to her favourite spot along Cooks River for breakfast when they visited Sydney. This suggests that urban rivers are a way of connecting with Vietnamese experiences, as well as what is new about Sydney.

#### *Gardens rather than parks?*

As well as seeking waterways, many interviewees like Bach and Nuoi expressed preferences for Sydney parks where nature was managed 'complemented by human efforts so that it's less wild and less empty and lifeless'. Even young people who have

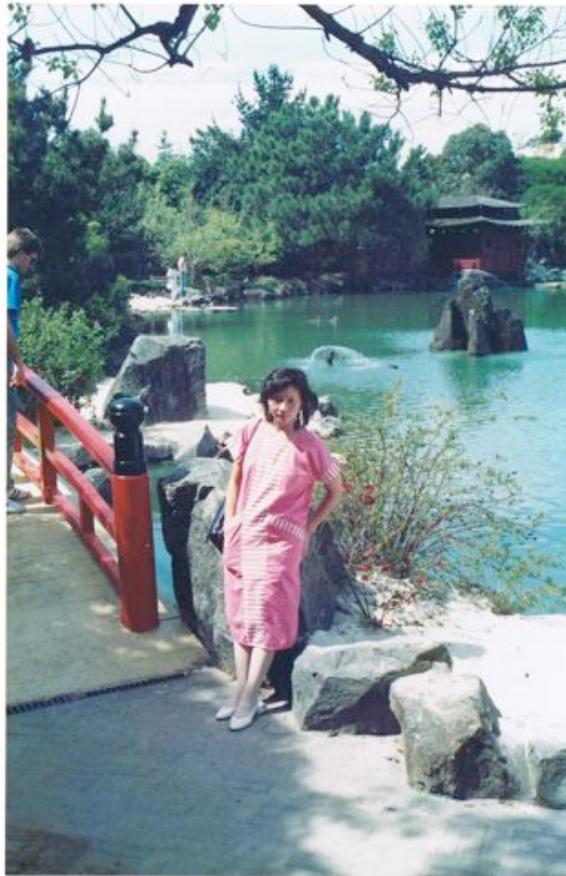
<sup>41</sup> H.Pham interview. See images of the Pham family at Georges River National Park: <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/goldandsilver/newhome/pham.shtml>

<sup>42</sup> M.Thomas, (2004) Transitions in taste in Vietnam and the Diaspora, *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 15 (1) pp54-67 p60

<sup>43</sup> Vietnamese Australian focus group, 2004, organised by Alison Phan, 29 September 2004, Garrison Point, Mirambeena Park

lived in Australia for most of their lives agreed with this preference for cultivated parks.<sup>44</sup>

Some interviewees selected images of themselves in Sydney parks, which reminded them of Vietnamese parks to illustrate early outings in their new country. Kim Nguyen noted that the Auburn Botanical Gardens (also known as the Japanese Gardens) was more like a park in Vietnam than a bush land setting, as it looked ‘cared’ for.



**Kim Nguyen at the Auburn Botanical Gardens soon after arriving in Sydney, 1988/9.  
Nguyen collection.**

Red bridges and Asian plantings within this park echo features of Vietnamese gardens and parks, while willows and water lilies at Mirambeena appear to have similar associations. Madzumar (*et al*) have suggested that the use of symbols like dragons in the built environment have been a vital part of making Little Saigon in California feel more like home for Vietnamese immigrants and refugees. This is part of the attraction

<sup>44</sup> M. Thomas (2002), pp26-7, p34

of public spaces like Freedom Plaza in Cabramatta Sydney too, as well as crowds, a feature of Vietnamese city life. This association can extend to ‘seeing’ Vietnam in rivers and lakes of Sydney as well as in built environments.<sup>45</sup>

The garden is crucial for understanding Vietnamese preferences for park visitation in addition to the presence of water. Environmental researcher Pam McElwee has commented that nature in Vietnam - including national parks - is seen as improved upon by people, with ornamentation, flowers and music.<sup>46</sup> Domesticated environments have tended to be valued in Vietnam rather than ‘wild’ places, which were often associated with malevolent forces and ghosts.<sup>47</sup> The link between gardens and parks in Vietnam is evident in the translation of the term itself. Mark Infield, of NGO Flora and Fauna International in Hanoi was told that a direct translation of National Parks into Vietnamese was ‘national gardens’ or *vườn quốc gia*.<sup>48</sup>

Numerous minority groups have lived in and used areas now declared national parks, in direct contrast to the idea of people-free ‘wilderness’, making the garden analogy (in the sense of a managed space), even more appropriate.<sup>49</sup> The creation of National Parks in Vietnam as elsewhere has been a fraught issue; with some groups such as the Muong people living in and around Cuc Phuong National Park excluded from their productive land and relocated onto non-arable land. Some minorities have resisted and found ways to access places they have used for grazing animals and for medicinal and food plant collection, especially in the highlands.<sup>50</sup> Both Aboriginal Australian and Vietnamese

<sup>45</sup> S. Madzumar, S. Mazumdar, F. Docuyan, and C M McLaughlin. (2000) Creating a Sense of Place: The Vietnamese- Americans and Little Saigon *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 20:319 - 333.

<sup>46</sup> P. McElwee (2001) Parks or people: exploring alternative explanation for protected area development in Vietnam, Yale University, [accessed 10 January 2006]  
<http://research.yale.edu/CCR/environment/papers/mcelwee.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> M. Di Gregorio, T. Rambo, and M. Yanagisawa (2003) ‘Clean, Green and Beautiful: Environment and Development under the Renovation Economy,’ in *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society* (ed) H. V. Luong. New York, Oxford, Singapore p187

<sup>48</sup> M. Infield interviewed by Allison Cadzow, 3 March 2006

<sup>49</sup> B. Rugendyke, and T. S. Nguyen (2005) Conservation costs: nature based tourism as development at Cuc Phuong National Park, Vietnam. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 46 (2):185-200; P. McElwee, (2006) Displacement and Relocation Redux: stories from South East Asia, *Conservation and Society* 2006, 4 (3) Sept

<sup>50</sup> Sterling et al (2006) p21; B. Rugendyke and T.S. Nguyen. Ibid, ; J. Sowerwine, (2004) *The political ecology of Dao (Yao) landscape transformations: Territory, gender, and livelihood politics in highland Vietnam*, PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley regarding Ba Vi National Park. See H. Goodall, Exclusion and Re-emplacment; Tensions around protected areas in Australia and South East Asia, *Conservation and Society* 4 (3), pp 383-395 for an overview.

environments have been used and cared for over thousands of years. Valuing this cultural work could make Australian parks more relevant to both communities and probably others, in this respect.<sup>51</sup>

The importance of productive natural places as links with homelands is evident in the home gardens of interviewees and has been noted by researchers regarding Vietnamese migrants gardens in Sydney.<sup>52</sup> Home gardens, including ponds, (which are used to raise fish and compost) are still important in Vietnam and have often helped sustain people through food shortages as well as supplying medicines and extra income.<sup>53</sup>

Thanh Hue's garden in Hue supplemented her families meagre food rations with vegetables in the 1960s and 70s. Her garden in Tempe (Sydney) in 2006 was filled with banana groves, papaya, dragon fruit and herbs, which she used in cooking Hue style dishes. As she explained:

My garden, it's bushy, there is no landscaping at all, but you'll have an idea how gardens in Vietnam look. So a lot of people come and say 'Oh God! I feel so homesick when I look at it!' <sup>54</sup>

A 2004 NSW DEC report found that 64% of Vietnamese people grew vegetables and fruit at home.<sup>55</sup> This suggests the importance of gardens as a means of connection with environments. It could be an important basis from which to build environmental discussion – about differences in places, conditions, water supply and sustainability.

This use-based knowledge of environment is closely linked to the cultural importance of food for Vietnamese people. Cuc Le Trong, suggested this in discussing ecological protection: 'just like you need diversity at the dining table, you need diversity in the

<sup>51</sup> M. Thomas (2002) mentions this briefly p72-3.

<sup>52</sup> S.Graham, and J. Connell, (2006) Nurturing relationships: the gardens of Greek and Vietnamese migrants in Marrickville, Sydney, *Australian Geographer*, v37, n3 pp375-393 November; L.Head, P Muir, and E Hampel. 2004. Australian backyard gardens and the journey of migration, *Geographical Review* 94 (3):326-347. For discussion of home environments and gardens, see Ch 3, M. Thomas (1999).

<sup>53</sup> LN.Trinh.; JW Watson; NN Hue, NN.De; NV Minh, P. Chu; B.R Sthapit; PB Eyzaguirre. (2003) Agrobiodiversity conservation and development in Vietnamese home gardens, *Agriculture Ecosystems and Environment*, 97 (1-3) July p319, p325 p333, L.T. Cuc, (1992) Homegrown advantages, *Ceres*, 138 (Nov-Dec)27-30. See *Gold and Silver* for more of Thanh Hue's story and photos of her gardens. <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/goldandsilver/homeland/hue.shtml> and <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/goldandsilver/newhome/hue.shtml>

<sup>54</sup> T. H. Nguyen Phuoc interviewed by A.Cadzow, 11 July 2005

<sup>55</sup> Department of Environment and Climate Change NSW (2004) *The Environment and Ethnic Communities in 2004 Community Profile, Vietnamese*. DEC: Hurstville

environment'.<sup>56</sup> Other interviewees also noted the importance of food in Vietnamese life and as a form of connection with nature.

*The Georges River as a dragon: feng shui*

For some Chinese Vietnamese people especially, rivers and water are valued in relation to feng shui, a geography of rivers and place. The term feng shui means literally “wind and water”, key factors in shaping physical environments and influencing their suitability as places to reside in, both during this life and in death. Feng shui can at a very simplified level be considered as a form of guidance for positioning oneself in the environment for maximum benefit and minimum destruction by supernatural and natural forces such as floods and landslides, as well as hostile human actions like invasion. In Vietnam it has influenced the location of villages and capital cities such as Hanoi and Hue. Some cultural geographers have argued that without recognizing feng shui it is next to impossible to explain the layout of many rural landscapes in East Asia and why houses, temples, paths, graves are located where they are.<sup>57</sup>

Some of the significance and associations of feng shui appear to have traveled to Australia. For a young Chinese Vietnamese member of a focus group, who enjoyed being near the water for fishing and bushwalks in Sydney, knew that being near the water was perceived to bring additional benefits. He said: ‘Water is calming I think and I mean for Chinese, *feng shui* it’s always good to even live by the water, it’s good fortune.’<sup>58</sup>

According to architect and feng shui scholar Evelyn Lip and feng shui master Siou Foon Lee, Sydney has auspicious energies because of the orientation of water and mountains

<sup>56</sup> L.T. Cuc interview with Allison Cadzow, 24 February 2006. Also discussed by M. Thomas (2004) ‘Traditions in taste in Vietnam and the diaspora’ *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 15, pp54-67. See P. Nguyen (2007) *Secrets of the Red Lantern: Stories and Vietnamese Recipes from the Heart*, Murdoch Books: Millers Point, for a moving and incisive exploration of refugee experience and growing up in South West Sydney, told through recipes, family history & autobiography and photos.

<sup>57</sup> E.Kenworthy-Teather, and C. S.Chow (2000) The Geographer and the Fengshui Practitioner: so close and yet so far apart? *Australian Geographer* 31 (3) p313, H.K.Yoon, (1980), The image of nature in geomancy. *Geojournal* 4 (4):341-348; L. Marafa, (2003) Integrating Natural and Cultural Heritage: the advantage of feng shui landscape resources, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 9 (4) 307-323

<sup>58</sup> Vietnamese focus group, 26 September 2004, Garrison Point, Mirambeena Park

to the city.<sup>59</sup> The winding watercourses of Sydney, such as the Georges River allow a build up of qi (earth energy), which promotes prosperity; while the Blue Mountains located behind the city, protect it.

Dai Le said that her mother knew that certain places on the Georges River, which is said to resemble a dragon in shape, were seen to be luckier than others, in relation to Cũu Long/Mekong in Vietnam. She had also heard that in Sydney, a beneficial place to live was around Chipping Norton where many middle class Vietnamese people live.<sup>60</sup> Vietnamese who are successful financially live there, which is regarded as attracting more qi and good fortune. Some Chipping Norton focus group residents said their neighborhood's good feng shui was due to their closeness of the Georges River.<sup>61</sup>

One interviewee had heard that people explained the success of Cabramatta's businesses being partly due to its positive feng shui. In one sense Cabramatta has grown and thrived because it's close to the migrant hostel where Vietnamese people originally stayed before they moved into private homes in nearby areas. Some Vietnamese people say this is part of the reason, but point out that Villawood isn't flourishing, and it is closer to the hostel. They said Cabramatta thrives because its feng shui is auspicious.<sup>62</sup>

While most Vietnamese have come to Sydney as refugees and are there for work and social reasons, these reasons could be seen as a way of reclaiming agency by explaining how they came to be here, particularly in ways which express pride in their achievements in the face of struggle. Feng shui operates as a familiarising strategy; a way of making a place and Vietnamese people's presence within it 'make sense'.<sup>63</sup> The dragon is used as a national symbol for Vietnam and to explain the shape of the country itself, so it could be a way of strengthening and valuing Vietnamese identities in

<sup>59</sup> E. Lip, 1997, *What is Feng Shui?* London: Academy editions; p18, figure 17 p20;. S. Foon-Lee 2002 in 'Fortune Selling', Real Estate section *Daily Telegraph*, 7 September 2002, <http://www.fengshui-innovations.com.au/news-a-articles/media-articles/43-real-estate.html> [viewed 6 June 2009]

<sup>60</sup> D. Le interviewed by H. Goodall and J. Kijas 2002 and interviewed by A..Cadzow 20 June 2005. See also discussion in D. Byrne, H. Goodall, S.Wearing, and A..Cadzow. 2006, *Enchanted Parklands? Australian Geographer* 37 (1):103-115.

<sup>61</sup> Chipping Norton Focus Group, interviewed by A..Cadzow 7 October 2007

<sup>62</sup> A.L.Pham, discussion with A. Cadzow, 28 January 2006.

<sup>63</sup> G. Waite, (2003) A Place for the Buddha in Wollongong New South Wales? Territorial rules in the place making of sacred spaces. *Australian Geographer* 34 (2):223-238 also D. Byrne et al (2006)

Sydney, a counterpoint to negative media associations of crime and drugs with Vietnamese people and Cabramatta.<sup>64</sup>

### *Fishing in Vietnam and Sydney*

The image of a fisherman by the river was mentioned by an interviewee as an iconic Vietnamese image people have brought with them.<sup>65</sup> The image and practice seems to remind some people (mainly men) of homeland. One example is Danh, a man in his 40s who recalled fishing and times spent with his brother in Vietnam.<sup>66</sup> Yet fishing here is different to Vietnam. There it is as close by as a front yard pond or river and women and men tend to fish. In Sydney, there are more restrictions and regulations and in parks it is often associated with leisure rather than work. Leisure fishing cafes have appeared around Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi in recent years, and for some (wealthier) city people fishing is increasingly associated with recreation.

In Australia, however, the Vietnamese community has been stigmatized by government agencies and fishing organizations who accuse Vietnamese fishing people of over-fishing and catching undersize fish, and so contributing to species decline. They have experienced violence and abuse from other fishers. NSW Fisheries appointed a Vietnamese liaison officer Hai Chung to discuss and promote fishing regulations in communities in the 1990s and a federal study of fishing was completed.<sup>67</sup> The FECCA report recognized that different ideas about fishing were held by some people from Vietnam where it was often a way of surviving and where it is also completely unregulated. The report pointed also to an assumed Vietnamese cultural food preferences for shellfish.<sup>68</sup> A US study suggested there is a different approach to catch use among Vietnamese commercial fishers, where even small fish are kept and used

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<sup>64</sup> H. Ngoc, (2004), p1055; Cung Ho Sy, HCMC, 17 March 2006 discussion notes and Hoang, Hue, 5 March 2006 discussion notes.

<sup>65</sup> C. Nguyen, interviewed by Jo Kijas, 2002

<sup>66</sup> Danh interviewed by A. Phan, October 2002

<sup>67</sup> M. Thomas, (2002), pp89-99

<sup>68</sup> Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia [FECCA] for Recfish Australia (1997) *We Fish for the Future: Recreational Fishing and People of Indo-Chinese Background*. Canberra: Department of the Environment. See also John Kleinen, 2007, "Stealing from the Gods", fisheries and local use of natural resources in Vietnam 1800-2000', in Greg Bankoff and Peter Boomgaard, *A history of natural resources in Asia: the wealth of nature*, Basingstoke, Palgrave McMillan,

among friends and family for making *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) rather than ‘wasted.’<sup>69</sup> Yet little sustained effort has gone into exploring this issue in Sydney and regulatory/punitive approaches continue to operate.

Acutely aware of how Vietnamese fishing is viewed by authorities and other members of the community, interviewees were often unwilling to discuss fishing. When some people did discuss fishing, they expressed embarrassment and concerns about other Vietnamese people catching prawns at Chipping Norton and selling them onto shops and relatives in the Cabramatta area. The water of Chipping Norton is toxic and since 2005 people have been advised not to eat fish from there or swim there. Living in a middle class area and being supportive of contemporary Australian environmental and health practices, they perhaps also associated such fishing with appearing like subsistence collection.<sup>70</sup>

Yet there are other ways of understanding Vietnamese Australian fishing. While fishing can be a familiarising and sociable activity, many city-based people didn’t fish before coming to Australia, apart from when they were children. Once in Australia, fishing can, for migrants and refugees, be a way of exploring a different environment and as well as a ‘purposeful’ form of leisure.<sup>71</sup> Dai Le explained that practices like fishing, shell collecting and photography in Australian parks were about sharing activities with other displaced Vietnamese:

...it was something ... they could do as a group of Vietnamese refugees, who had the same experiences of living in camps all these years...To have the space and the environment to enjoy oneself with your children, I think it was that whole concept of freedom, this is what freedom means...they went to collect these seashells so that they could come home, celebrate, eat this food they collected together, so it’s the collectiveness, doing things together with other Vietnamese.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>69</sup> P. Starr.(1981) Troubled Waters: Vietnamese Fisherfolk on Americas Gulf Coast, *International Migration Review* 15 (1-2) Spring-Summer, p231. The article also draws attention to different ideas about safety and regulation in the US and Vietnam.

<sup>70</sup> See H. Goodall, S. Wearing, D. Byrne, D. and J. Kijas (2004) Recognising Cultural Diversity: the Georges River Project in South-West Sydney. In *Sustainability and Social Science*, (ed) E. Katz and H. Cheney. Canberra: CSIRO and Goodall, H., Wearing, S., Byrne D. and Cadzow A., (2009) ‘Fishing the Georges River: cultural diversity and urban environments’ in *Everyday Multiculturalism*, (eds) A. Wise and S.Velayutham, Palgrave Macmillan: Hampshire, for more extensive discussion of these issues.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid*

<sup>72</sup> Dai Le interviewed by Heather Goodall and Jo Kijas 2002

Fishing is a way to make new memories in Australia rather than necessarily casting back to familiar but distant activities or imagined landscapes. Building positive shared memories makes new places become significant for people. This would seem to be especially important after the trauma of fleeing homeland. New connections and memories have been made through activities like fishing and as Goodall has argued, for Vietnamese Australians fishing provides a way of engaging with the environment and being Vietnamese in Australia.<sup>73</sup>

### *Education*

Older interviewees valued connections of landscape with memory and education of grandchildren in repeat visits to parks and celebrations. The natural environment here in Australia was contrasted, as with Dai Le's account with previous experiences of war and havoc in Vietnam. Bach said:

The joy of it is to see all your children and grandchildren playing together, enjoying each other's company. I get to talk about old times, to teach and remind my children and grandchildren of their background and cultural origin. It's also fun sometimes when we catch fish but it rarely happens. However, it's a wonderful feeling to see your family having fun, no more war, no more poverty, no worries about work and all.<sup>74</sup>

This characteristic emphasis on family is an important feature of Vietnamese Australian life, which can be affirmed in parks. Parks can become sites for shared narrations of memories and cultural knowledge.<sup>75</sup> The conversations which occur during such park visits also served as a way of teaching their children and grandchildren about where they came from. This seemingly nostalgic activity is simultaneously forward looking, in terms of educating a new generation about older generations lives.

Vietnamese Sydneysiders are not necessarily nostalgic or reluctant to try new experiences. Both Dai Le and the Nguyens recalled that they have always had a great desire to explore new places in Australia. As an ESL teacher in the Cabramatta area Kim Nguyen sees her enthusiasm for experiencing new places mirrored in her young students:

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<sup>73</sup> H. Goodall, *et al* (2009), p184

<sup>74</sup> Bach and Nuoi, interviewed by Alison Phan, Oct 2002

<sup>75</sup> T. Blokland, (2001) Bricks, Mortar, Memories: Neighbourhood and Networks in Collective Acts of Remembering. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25 (2):268-280.

They love excursions, and they love exploring. Like we did in the past, they want to adjust themselves into the environment - and everyone thinks the same opinion that the environment in Australia is the best.<sup>76</sup>

She spoke of the isolation many felt on arriving and how they planned activities to help make the place familiar and accessible like going on the Parramatta *Rivercat* and picnics in parks and gardens.<sup>77</sup>

Apart from having adventures in Australia, sometimes it is the return trips to Vietnam, which clarify for Vietnamese Australians where they feel they belong, and the environments they are simultaneously attached to. For the Nguyens, the passing of time, working and living in Canberra and Sydney, raising children in Australia, and returning with them to visit relatives in Vietnam raised many conflicting feelings about 'home'. Kim Nguyen said of this experience: "...we realised that Australia is our home. Vietnam is our home country but Australia is our home."<sup>78</sup>

The interviewees' understanding of place were not set in time as if always looking backwards, as if memories of life in Vietnam predetermined the course of relationships with place here. Rather, Vietnamese Australians are constantly navigating connections to both countries.

## Conclusion

An important part of learning and acquiring knowledge is being able to share it with others and pass it on. Rich cultural knowledges and memories of places, especially rivers are held by Vietnamese Australians, which are not being recognized or valued enough in the broader community. Vietnamese Sydneysiders are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with environmental ideas, as their creative responses in interpreting environments in Vietnam and Sydney, evident throughout this article indicate.

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<sup>76</sup> K. Nguyen, interviewed by Allison Cadzow, 12 July 2005

<sup>77</sup> See Nguyen family photos and expanded text at *Gold and Silver*  
<http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/goldandsilver/newhome/nguyen.shtml>

<sup>78</sup> V. and K. Nguyen interview 2005. See expanded text at *Gold and Silver*  
<http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/goldandsilver/revisiting/nguyen.shtml>. See also N.Chau Nguyen, 2009, Ch 6: Return journeys for analysis of return journey narratives.

This environmental knowledge needs to be valued and used more. It could be used in looking after river areas in southwest Sydney and could contribute to environmental programs in Vietnam as well. For example Clean Up Australia Day was participated in by focus group members from Chipping Norton and has been adopted in Hoi An by a Vietnamese Australian who runs a café there.

Making the Australian landscape seem more alive and symbolically resonant could signal a valuing of cultural knowledges of place as worthy of sharing. There are several ways this could be explored. Considering Vietnamese knowledge of and interest in productive places and home gardens NSW DECC Discovery tours in urban parks like Georges River National Park could emphasise Aboriginal communities' use and cultivation of places. The Cabra (cobra) worms as a food source and their connection with the naming of Cabramatta suggests possibilities. This could be used as an opportunity to explore why there are limits on collection, the importance of biodiversity and differences in Australia to Vietnam. Tours could emphasise Vietnamese and Aboriginal connections between the dragon and rainbow serpent as place makers in consultation with the appropriate Indigenous advisors.

Particular river parks and places have been repeatedly visited for over 20 years by Vietnamese Australians such as Chipping Norton and Picnic Point. Some reflection and recognition of this in interpretation on site is worth considering. As Low has suggested, for a community seeing their history and experiences represented in the parks is associated with being valued in the wider community.<sup>79</sup> Vietnamese Australians use these park sites with many Arabic speaking people and other communities who have extensive cultural knowledge and experiences of waterways acquired in their homelands and from learning to live in Sydney. Shared interests like fishing and barbequing could be useful areas to forge connections and look at similarities and differences. River relationships are also a useful comparison considering the centrality of rivers in Iran, Iraq and Sudan for Arabic speakers now in Sydney, following Strang's suggestion of embracing both commonality and difference in relationships with water.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> S. Low (2005) p196

<sup>80</sup> V. Strang, (2005) p92

Recognizing Vietnamese knowledge of Georges River, in relation to Aboriginal, Arabic, Chinese, and other residents' engagements with place means we can explore connections between places in the world. We can see it as knowledge garnered and reworked from many sources and places, which changes over time. We need to look at how Vietnamese and other Australian stories merge and diverge, like rivers, to consider how their voices and narratives can be mediums for these places too like water itself. Valuing various ways of coming to the river and knowing it can help to provide richer and more equitable senses of place and belonging in Sydney and beyond.

### **Interviews:**

- Alison Phan and Cuong Nguyen interviewed by Jo Kijas, 11 September 2002
- Anh Linh Pham and T\* discussion with Allison Cadzow, 28 January 2006
- Bach & Nuoi, interviewed by Alison Phan, October 2002
- Boi Tran Huynh-Beattie B.T. email communication and interview by A..Cadzow, 21 July 2006, and discussion 22 August 2006
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