

Cultural Preservation in the Vietnamese-American Diaspora: The Tradition of Vietnamese Culture Night

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Description:

This project aims to uncover and document the origin story of Vietnamese Culture Night, a 40-year-old performing arts show held by collegiate Vietnamese Student Association clubs all across Northern America. Although Vietnamese Culture Night has such a long-standing history and important role in Vietnamese-American culture — it has existed since the very conception of Vietnamese-American identity in the 1960s/70s — there has been no academic or scholarly research performed on its history. The project takes the form of a long-form journalism piece that highlights the show's importance and implication on identity formation in the Vietnamese-American community.

Excerpt:

The story begins, like most Vietnamese American stories, with the Vietnam War.

Years of political and economic instability during the war ultimately culminated in a date intimately familiar to most Vietnamese people: April 30, 1975. This day marks the Fall of Saigon, the original capital city of Vietnam, to the People's Army of Vietnam and the Viet Cong. The event marked the official end of the Vietnam War.

To the Southern Vietnamese, the date is referred to as “the day we lost our country.” To current mainland Vietnamese citizens, the date is celebrated as the “day of liberation.” The Fall of Saigon was the catalyst of most overseas Vietnamese relocation, as refugees fled the country to escape political and economic persecution. As inequality grew in the country with the formal reunification of Vietnam into the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, more and more Vietnamese people took to the seas in search of a better life.

One of those people was Bui Van Phu, who at the time was a law student at Saigon University. Bui is one of the founders of the Vietnamese Student Association at UC Berkeley, which was started in 1977, just two years after the war ended.

In these early years — between 1975 and the 1980s — collegiate Vietnamese Student Associations (VSAs) were especially important as spaces where Vietnamese Americans, who were then usually war refugees, could come together to form community and provide mutual aid. According to Bui, who is now 64, UC Berkeley's VSA was initially founded with the goal of helping Vietnamese students succeed academically.

But the role of these clubs would evolve dramatically over the years, becoming a place where Vietnamese Students could socialize and find community, spread awareness of their culture and advocate for political issues, and memorialize Vietnamese art and culture. In later years, VSAs have become spaces for second-generation Vietnamese Americans to reconnect with their cultural identities.

And perhaps the most significant and long-running tradition of collegiate VSAs is the Vietnamese Culture Night (VCN), which actually traces back to pre-1975. VCNs are entirely student-run performing arts shows that center around the theme of showcasing Vietnamese culture and issues, initially through performances like original Vietnamese-language and English-language skits, traditional Vietnamese dance, fashion shows featuring traditional Vietnamese clothing, vocal performances of traditional folk songs, and much more.

While the tradition has undoubtedly evolved and changed throughout its 40-plus-year history, one thing has remained the same: Vietnamese Culture Night has always been a celebration and discussion of the Vietnamese culture and diaspora. The show has carved out a unique space like no other to amplify the concerns, fears, celebrations, and voices of Vietnamese American youth. What does it mean to be Vietnamese American? What does it mean to be part of the Vietnamese diaspora? How do you hold onto a country and culture that exists only in memory and in heart?

Vietnamese Culture Night is a space where youth can ask those questions and explore the boundaries and implications of Vietnamese American identity — past, present, and future.