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The Cultural Politics of Vietnamese Language Pedagogy

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For those of us who teach Southeast Asian literature, history and culture in the English language, our work can arguably be said to be primarily about reconstruction. We wield the power and agency to (re)create literary and cultural history, finding materials and texts in both the original language and in English translation. We re-tell that legacy with our own mediation and biases in the form of a syllabus and our own course readers. Teachers of world literature or global literature in English translation experience the complexities of re-construction daily in contestations over the proximity of translated editions to the “original,” over language choices in diction, and about elusive and illusory national literary histories. We engage in these debates in search of clarity and loyalty to the original, despite the knowledge that there exists no single, fixed, original literary history or national language form and that every reconstruction is a new construction in itself.

For us, then, language teaching is fundamentally always already much more than a mere means of communication. It is much more than an undergraduate college pre-requisite or breadth requirement for “coverage.” The teaching of a national language is also at once the re-construction of a cultural lineage and the creation of a whole new generation of language users and global cultural citizens. What version of cultural lineage will get taught? What kind of generation do we want that to be? Do we want a new generation of students versed in the current historiography being taught in a primary speech community, one that may be constructed or imagined as fixed? Or do we want our language students to know the full history of the multiple language traditions in any given national context, even as they learn only one contemporary language form? What exactly constitutes the primary speech community of diasporic or “heritage” learners? These students will communicate with one another in a particular geopolitical space and place

in time with a language that is supposedly transparent enough to translate across at least two cultures – 1) the culture of the U.S. college classroom made up of large percentages of heritage students with their multiple background language forms and 2) the contemporary culture of the target language. I understand these two entirely different cultures to embody two distinct, but interconnected primary speech communities.

The sociopolitical particularities of the contemporary primary speech communities – the U.S. language classroom and the target national culture – need to be adequately historicized and contextualized if students are to more fully understand the reaches and ramifications of their acquired languages. To this end, then, the following study discusses the importance of political shifts and cultural historical changes that need to be recognized and re-constructed by language educators in relation to the current national language forms of instruction. It focuses specifically on the examples of instruction in Vietnamese, and to a very limited extent Filipino/Tagalog, language and culture. This cultural political approach takes into consideration the role of the student audience, the politics of the instructor, the slant of resource/instructional materials, as well as the disciplinary and interdisciplinary infrastructures already in place. The language politics of both “host” and “home” cultures (when these two labels are often interchangeable) are even more complex and crucial to underscore in the case of heritage languages and their diasporic communities, whose hearts and minds are still recovering from the lingering traumas of exile, war, immigration, loss and survival.

As I hope to elaborate in subsequent pages, failure to represent the social history and embedded cultural political economics of language instruction manifests in the neglect of some major pedagogical problems in classroom practices. In the case of heritage languages, these problems include 1) a broad, uneven range of instructors’ skills levels and pedagogical training, 2) a diversity of students’ skills levels and immigration patterns, 3) a lack of cultural sensitivity to diasporic acculturation issues regarding homeland politics, 4) the U.S. national neglect of embedded regional politics that play out in the classroom, 5) the possible geopolitical slant of resource and instructional materials, 6) U.S. federal and local funding systems, and 7) academic institutional infrastructural problems that affect interest in the language study. Only by exploring the larger historical and political economic difficulties informing and perpetuating these pedagogical problems in greater detail can we hope to ameliorate the existing instructional impediments in our heritage language classroom.

Contemporary Vietnamese Language Instructors in the United States

In our current historical moment, almost all instructors of Vietnamese in the United States are immigrants. James Freeman explains the educational make-up of the first wave of refugee immigrants, who left Vietnam in April of 1975 at the end of the war:

The first survey showed that nearly three-fourths of the refugees came from urban backgrounds. They tended to be fairly well educated: 48 percent of the heads of households had received high school training, and nearly 28 percent had received some university education. This made

them educational elites in Vietnam, where in 1975 less than 16 percent were in secondary school, and less than 3 percent were in the university.¹

First generation instructors who arrived in the United States in 1975 often came with Bachelor's degrees and occasionally even Master's degrees in English or Vietnamese literature, linguistics, history or economics from Vietnamese, French, American, and English universities. Some of these achievers managed to work toward further limited higher educational training in the United States in the way of Master's or Ph.D. programs at American institutions. Those in this latter group have to some extent been taught how and are able to or have been forced to observe, experience and integrate acculturation difficulties into their classroom instruction, creating a more empathetic space for their often 1.5 or second-generation students, all of whom struggle with the constant pulls of bi-culturality.² There also exist a small number of secondary migration instructors, who gained higher educational training in countries such as Australia, Japan, Russia or China, before secondarily immigrating to the United States to practice.

The second wave of refugees, referred to as "the Boat People," began to arrive in the United States in 1978 and continued into the early 1990s. They included more varied socio-economic backgrounds, including ethnic Chinese Vietnamese, those from more rural villages who were less highly educated and had not worked in governmental or military sectors:

In Vietnam, most had held urban jobs such as shopkeepers, machine operators, factory workers, and construction workers (Whitmore 1985: 69). Other boat people who followed included many professionals such as physicians, lawyers, and teachers, as well as Buddhist and Christian monks, priests, and nuns, who, if not persecuted, were often singled out for discrimination in Communist Vietnam. Former reeducation camp prisoners, who had escaped or been released from the camps, also fled. In addition, the boat people included students, farmers, fishermen, craftsmen and laborers, youths fleeing the military draft for the Cambodia conflict, business people, and children sent out by their parents in the hopes that they would have a better future. They had lower levels of education, fewer material resources and job skills, less knowledge of English, and less contact with American ways than the first wave refugees.³

Our instructors of the second wave of "Boat People" refugees and a third wave of southern veterans and other released re-education camp prisoners in the Humanitarian Operation Program, as well as the latter of the Orderly Departure Program immigrants, have rarely had the opportunity for further formal educational and instructional training in the United States. They struggled to make ends meet upon arrival in the United States, they tended to have poorer English skills, and they often settled near large demographics of Vietnamese residential communities, or "Little Saigons," for ease of communication, acceptance and socioeconomic assistance. As a result, they are often less economically and academically mobile and have a more difficult time finding any desired work in education, much less able to afford further education. Nevertheless, this latter group

makes up the larger pool from which our American college and university systems rely so heavily upon to fill the ranks of part-time and full-time lectureships in language instruction.

The inherent institutionalized undervaluation and underpayment of language instructors in the United States financially disallows or renders nearly impossible individual and family relocations to new teaching positions, particularly for part-time instruction. Colleges and universities must then rely on relatively local instructors, who are willing to travel daily for part-time work. There is something wrong with the way language teaching is viewed in the United States, when our foreign language faculty and staff must clandestinely fill multiple community college and state university positions – all with huge workloads – leaving them no time or energy to perfect their craft, so to speak, or to devote countless hours to needy and hungry students. One can see how difficult it would be, despite constant encouragement from language departments, to digitize the classroom content, to devise new curricular programming, to attend language conferences, or to invest in cultural sensitivity training, when our instructors are already being pulled in so many directions.

For universities or colleges with Southeast Asian studies programs or those with faculty connections, a third source of Vietnamese language instructors has been Vietnam, itself. Paul Freeman briefly describes the educational background or context from which the post-1975 immigrants and the contemporary visiting Vietnamese faculty nationals emerge:

Under Communist rule in North Vietnam, where education was used as a means of political persuasion, the emphasis was on extending basic literacy and providing a Marxist education. After 1975, with the Communist victory throughout Vietnam, many students whose families were politically suspect were denied education, especially at higher levels. Impoverished rural areas had virtually no books or materials, teachers were so underpaid that they usually held several jobs to make ends meet, and school buildings often went unrepaired. In 1986, the Renovation policy, which liberalized the economy, also led to a revamping of education, with greater emphasis on contemporary subjects. The English language is now taught beginning in the first grade, though the emphasis is on grammar and reading rather than on oral communication.... The main problems in improving education continue to be lack of funds, a serious shortage of qualified teachers and materials, and the low salaries of teachers. Teachers end up moonlighting, and parents have to pay for books, materials, and the maintenance of school buildings (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1992: 48-51).⁴

Of course, some of these conditions sound disquietingly similar to our current American K-12 public educational system. While Vietnam has worked quite rapidly to overcome its shortcomings in public education with commercial academic enterprises in the last

decade,⁵ the bureaucratic nature of educational policy in the United States takes much longer to overcome.

In order to address such instructional imbalance or shortcomings in heritage language programs in the United States, a number of areas can be improved. First, language institutions- including language program directors, education abroad organizers, and field representatives- need to understand the consequences of Vietnam war immigration history, while individual instructors should be able to adequately articulate this history to their students. Secondly, language course offerings should be supplemented by other undergraduate courses in Vietnamese history and culture, ethnic studies, and immigration and resettlement sociology for a more comprehensive student understanding of the Vietnamese language as a transnational phenomenon, an invaluable asset and a changing commodity. Next, more open lines of communication and encouraged sharing amongst Vietnamese language instructors, and better articulation of quality consistency between higher educational instruction, K-12 educational offerings, and community organizational instruction by teachers in local churches and temples will be crucial in the years to come.

Currently, there are already in existence excellent community-based organizations of Vietnamese instructors, such as the *Ban Van Dong Thanh Lap Lien Truong Viet Ngu* (Advocates for the Vietnamese Heritage Language School Coalition) in Seattle, Washington, the Federation of Young Vietnamese Volunteers Organization in Northern California, or the Association of Vietnamese Language and Cultural Schools and Center of Southern California. The organizations are often well-organized and extremely efficient, but can nevertheless benefit from additional pedagogical training by higher educational professionals. Another excellent example of such necessary articulation across instructional levels is a Vietnamese bilingual education program initiated by the William Barton Rogers Middle School, a Boston Public School in Hyde Park, Massachusetts, which partners with Curry College and three local Vietnamese American community organizations, in order to build a long-term partnership leading to higher quality Vietnamese language and English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction and more support for Vietnamese American immigrant student matriculation. Various organizations and universities do offer occasional teacher training opportunities, such as the Van Lang Vietnamese Language and Culture Education Center in San Jose, California or the University of California, Los Angeles' Center for Southeast Asian Studies, respectively, but often these programs are expected to spend much of their time and funding resources on applied linguistics seminars, ESL guidance and training, or materials development.

My argument here is that for our diverse instructors with uneven educational training and experiences coming from these varied immigration waves, further training must include education about the very differences in academic politics of their immigration and acculturation histories so that they better understand the socio-intellectual contexts of their own pedagogical methodologies. To my knowledge, the Council of Teachers of Southeast Asian Languages (COTSEAL), in cooperation with the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute (SEASSI) at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, are the only national organizations currently taking steps to improve national Vietnamese

language instruction with implementation of formal teacher training opportunities for both Vietnamese-American and Vietnamese instructors.

Heritage Learners of Vietnamese⁶

The consequence of having three different waves of Vietnamese immigration to the United States leaves its mark in both the varied skills levels of our instructors, as well as on the student make-up in our classrooms. Today, most college-aged Vietnamese Americans enrolling in Vietnamese language courses are the children of the 1.5 and second generation immigrants, or the grandchildren of the first generation of 1975 wave immigrants. Many are American-born and understand little more than Vietnamese restaurant menus. This student pool includes youth from the three varied immigration waves; they range from little to no skills in Vietnamese in the first generation and first immigrant wave to the fewer numbers fairly fluent in comprehension and speaking but no reading or writing skills in the later immigration waves.

Many adolescents today receive some minimal preliminary Vietnamese language instruction at various churches and temples in their local communities when available during their primary school days, but have forgotten much of this early education by the time they reach their college years, the time when the search for ethnic and racial belonging is often sociologically more pronounced. These students tend to comprehend spoken Vietnamese, like that specifically spoken by their parents and families, but refrain from speaking it themselves, a result of conscious anxieties of hybrid or bicultural self-identity and perhaps some traumatic experiences of ostracization or teasing within their own ethnic community and immediate family when their attempts have met with less success in the past. Others (but definitely not most) who immigrate to the United States in their teenage years have quite a firm grasp of speaking and comprehension skills, and some reading and writing skills, but most have limited English skills. Of these latter, depending on their level and speed of English acquisition and the amount of schooling they had received in Vietnam, some are in the rare position to study advanced Vietnamese language acquisition. However, because of their immigration timing and survival experiences, they are often less concerned about cultural heritage than economic mobility and occupational success in their college years.

Many want to learn the language in order to communicate better with their parents and grandparents here in the United States, to converse with family members they intend to visit in Vietnam, or to correspondence with relatives and friends in Vietnam and throughout the diaspora. A small number envision future research activities or business ventures abroad. Most hope to travel to, as well as up and down, the whole of Vietnam one day. As a result of the large demographics of Vietnamese Americans situated in localized pockets or ethnic enclaves across the United States, these students have at least two simultaneous primary speech communities (1. their ethnic communities and families here and 2. the target language forms spoken in the contemporary Socialist Republic of Vietnam), making them different from say, German, French or even Indonesian heritage learners, whose diasporic language exchange opportunities are rare because of wide geographical dispersal. This problem of diverse and uneven student population is more

pronounced in Northern and Southern California, Houston, Seattle, and Boston schools than at Cornell or Yale, for example, where the student demographics are not necessarily drawn from the same large diasporic concentrations.

With so much diversity in the skill levels of students in the beginning Vietnamese heritage language classroom, it becomes a juggling game for our instructors to address the students' various acquisition difficulties. We have come to find uneven instruction in our classrooms, depending on whether the instructor chooses to teach "up" to the most excellent students, to teach "down" to the most unskilled student, or to teach to the average student in each classroom. Either the course moves much too quickly for the trailing, less advanced students when the instructor teaches up to the quickest language learners, or the more advanced students become bored and apathetic members of the classroom community when the instructor more diligently responds to the needs of the newest language beginners.

To some extent, separate heritage tracks and other heritage language programs could alleviate some of these difficulties. In Spanish language programs, for example, additional tracks often remedy many complications by separating the "native" and "non-native" speakers into a regular and a heritage track, because there are enough interested "non-native" speakers of Spanish to fill the regular tracks. This luxury is rarely afforded the case of a potential regular Vietnamese language track, however, because college enrollment minimums are usually not met with the few non-heritage students interested in learning the language for research, for love or for money. Public colleges and universities need to re-think the high minimum numbers and large maximum enrollment caps required for course funding, when these policies directly affect the quality of education their students will receive.

Finally, the accompanying difficulties of instructional consciousness and student linguistic awareness also need to be addressed, since heritage tracks will not completely erase classroom diversity nor will it train the instructors to handle tense situations with respect and understanding. It is from our experiences with and observations of our students' social psychological plights that we feel this blind spot in our instruction of Vietnamese language needs to be highlighted and improved, in order to proceed in the building of our language levels, particularly the intermediate and advanced levels after foreign language requirements have been met.

Cultural Sensitivity to Heritage Learners

Several significant issues of cultural sensitivity plague our diasporic heritage students. For one, depending on where in the United States the student acculturates and the reasons for his or her language "loss," he or she will come to the classroom with identificatory anxieties already in place. For many Asian Pacific American youth growing up in predominantly "white" or mainstreamed, traditionally assimilated neighborhoods, the constant pull to claim "American-ness" and prevalent forms of racism have discouraged them and their families from retaining any markers of "foreignness," including usage of their heritage languages. Add to this concern the taunting accusations of "banana" or

“Twinkie” status (“yellow on the outside, white on the inside”) imposed by other peers and older Vietnamese American generations more conversant in Vietnamese, a competing social pressure to also claim “the homeland” or one’s Asian ethnic roots.

Another under-examined area of student sensitivity that has been more difficult to address in U.S. scholarship on Vietnamese language instruction is the underlying attention, or lack thereof, to Vietnamese regional language politics and the cultural stereotypes associated with the three regions of Vietnam and their inherent regional accents. In the way of background, heritage language students and often even instructors come to the Vietnamese classroom with familiar characteristic stereotypes of the three regions of Vietnam. In crude terms, charges against families from the North include an extreme adherence to elitist systems of ritual and tradition as modeled after Confucian Chinese colonial history, a self-perception of moral and cultural superiority, and severe impositions of social behavioral guidelines and principles. The Central region, despite having once occupied the seat of national power and home to the monarchy, is often imagined as a bucolic unchanging space with difficult challenges facing the rural villages, a quaint class of noble savages hungry for education, and a perversion of the written Vietnamese language in its disregard for diacritics and tonal accents in pronunciation. Southerners are viewed as impudent and lazy in their blunt use of language, dismissive of formality and rigor, and less aware of or beholden to cultural traditions after extended exposure to “the West” and global capitalism. While these stereotypes are completely arbitrary in application, the minute a student in the U.S. Vietnamese language classroom opens her or his mouth to speak, she or he is immediately marked by regional affiliation and sometimes also immigration wave, both of which may or may not affect this student’s relationship to the instructor.

Compounded with these considerations of interpersonal classroom dynamics, this difference of Vietnamese regional family background has much larger social political implications on the question of the students’ two primary speech communities. They often need to learn how to function in both varied national and social contexts. To give one common anecdotal example of a familiar Vietnamese language classroom problem, a heritage student of Da Nang central Vietnamese family background takes a Beginning Vietnamese course with an instructor of Hanoi northern-accented Vietnamese whose family migrated to South Vietnam in 1954. This student returns to her family during the summer break speaking the pre-1975 northern language form adopted in the classroom, much to the dismay, criticism and alienation of her primarily central-accented speaking family (the first of her primary speech communities). She questions whether this language instruction will actually help her to build stronger bonds with her immediate and extended family if the family feels that her education will further repress her regional cultural heritage, and she chooses not to continue with Intermediate Vietnamese the following academic year.

To cite another more problematic but not uncommon example, a heritage student of pre-1975 southern family background – a family that fled Saigon, since renamed Ho Chi Minh City, by boat in 1981 to avoid political persecution – takes a Beginning Vietnamese course with an instructor of contemporary post-1975 Hanoi northern-accented

Vietnamese. He is told he must adopt this Vietnamese language form, because it is the current official Vietnamese language usage formalized by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. When he replies in the classroom with his familiar southern family vocabulary for words such as “pen” or “to rent” (different between northern and southern forms), he is chastised for using “improper,” “outdated,” or at worst “backward” diction. With much shame and hesitation, the student makes the necessary adjustments throughout the year, and returns in the summer to a family for whom his new language unearths and further inflicts the trauma of exile and loss they have agonized to overcome. A family upset by this dramatic change in their child’s intellectual and academic development and unfamiliar with the possible arbitrariness of the U.S. educational bureaucracy and policies questions the college curriculum and leadership with its seemingly “communist” imposition upon their generation’s youth and instructs the student not to return to Intermediate Vietnamese the following year.

Historically in the University of California system, for example, many Vietnamese heritage students’ parents have registered complaints of our university instructors speaking and teaching predominantly in the Northern dialect. Meanwhile, administrators often show wonder as to why this is such a concern for heritage student parents. In addition to the social psychological considerations of these heritage learners’ immediate communities, our instructors and programs must also confront the institutional factors and Vietnamese domestic national politics that have affected changes in the national language form. The intellectual power of the Northern accent climbed feverishly post-1975. Following the end of the war, the new government wanted to re-situate the national capital to Hanoi, distancing the memory of a Western colonial Central past and a powerful Southern economy and cultural lineage. Frequent allegations were made in the international press and within the diasporic communities about the destruction and alteration of cultural historical archival materials and the removal or dislocation of such historical artifacts to the North. One might here argue that this kind of language engineering or language “evolution” in its most benign manifestation is done everywhere in all national contexts to all languages. For Vietnamese diasporic communities, however, this period symbolized a dark age in cultural production, freedom of speech and democracy, as well as a loss of the homeland itself and of future authentic proof of existence for this historical home and national memory. These charges of propagandistic re-education against the then new Northern seat of nationalist power bespoke of a strategic historical amnesia and a silencing of the historic past of these diasporic communities.

Historical changes in Vietnamese vocabulary and terminology become attributable to various nationalist and cultural revisionist causes post-1975. Concrete instructional changes in the South were implemented with the hiring of Northern instructors, resulting at times in the coining of new vocabulary by new Northern immigration into the South following the war. Immigration patterns even solely within Hanoi and its surrounding environs have affected the Northern dialect spoken since 1954, as suggested by one historian and language instructor. Since many of the educated elite fled Hanoi for the South in 1954 following partition and in fear of communist persecution of intellectuals, it has been suggested that those who remained, combined with the new immigration from

the rural outskirts of Hanoi, changed the spoken and subsequently written Vietnamese that is now utilized in the North, so that even the Northern Vietnamese spoken today is not the same as that maintained at different moments in the historical past. This kind of information is often imparted to me with a tone of mourning for “a decline of culture,” particularly by diasporic Northerners, themselves. The tone reveals both negative connotations of educational poverty for the peasantry and rural classes, from which the new Northern working class and communist party members are seen to emerge, and it reveals a nostalgic melancholy for the unrealized, idealized pre-war educational and intellectual potential. All language policy and perceptions of language policy are always saturated with social political motivations and resonances.⁷

On the surface, these cultural politics do not appear directly relevant to or somehow threatening to language pedagogy. However, they reveal cultural-political questions that translate into and lie at the heart of many pedagogical problems. If students feel misunderstood and disrespected in their first year of Vietnamese language instruction, they will most certainly choose not to continue into the higher levels. There appears to be a problem with a lack of historical knowledge about the history of Vietnam and its diaspora, insufficient pedagogical training for instructors and language program directors, and limited diversity of instructional resource materials about students’ own cultural backgrounds, which in turn, create and perpetuate a situation in which students feel disrespected. There is nothing inherently reprehensible about promoting one nationalistic language form, but it becomes a problem when the imagined space of that nationalism is still under negotiation and contestation.

We might here benefit from a glimpse at the effects of state policy and educational intervention in the case of the “Filipino” language as the Philippine government’s attempt to nationalize and solidify its citizenry through the imposition of a national language. In the government’s attempt to devise a more universal national language by collapsing the diversity of its linguistic groups into one common official form, complications of such homeland state policies arise within the diaspora of Ilocano speakers or users, to name only one example, when “Filipino” is seen as a biased national tongue privileging the preponderance of Tagalog vocabulary.

United States National Response to Regional Politics

At the National Colloquium for U.S. Language Educational Policy, held at the University of California, Berkeley on October 21-22, 2005, organized by the University of California Consortium for Language Learning and Teaching (UCCLLT), Mary Louise Pratt of NYU, 2004 Chair of the Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages for the Modern Language Association characterized the rhetoric of language education in the United States as a disturbing discourse of war and weaponry.⁸ With such an eye toward global competition and big-brother policing and patronage, curricular development of Vietnamese research and language programs in the United States runs the high risk of a condescension and dismissiveness toward community politics and cultural sensitivity. For example, the rhetorical differentiation of Vietnamese language curricula at Southeast Asian “research institutions” from “community-driven language programs” reveals an

assumption that somehow “objective” contemporary research would disengage itself from diasporic community politics, rather than being attentive to those political considerations. It is accepted that many of these research programs have been cautious to avoid any extremely vigorous anti-communist pressure from Vietnamese American communities by distancing themselves from the communities altogether. It is also oddly imagined that Vietnamese language programs located near or within large Vietnamese American populaces are in some way deficient in academic rigor because they “must” conform to community anti-communist pressure, rather than being able to take advantage of the multiply faceted diversity of these populations’ Vietnamese language forms. The nationalist rhetoric of armed warfare simplifies citizens and immigrants into good guys and bad guys, as opposed to honoring the rich complexity of peoples, nations and cultural forms.

Therefore, while some Western academics today cite Hanoi as the current cultural and intellectual capital of Vietnam and choose to teach Vietnamese language learners only the contemporary post-1975 Northern Vietnamese form, many diasporic Vietnamese view this adherence as a naïve glossing over and historical near-sightedness about Vietnamese culture and its long and bountiful history. The diasporic communities also see this as an uncritical acceptance of postwar Socialist Republic propaganda that has never been adequately addressed in U.S. academic scholarship. Many of this persuasion deem this pedagogical approach as blind acceptance to simplistic internationalist rhetoric and a continued rendering silent and invisible of the trauma of diasporic Republic of Vietnam families. From the point of view of a Southeast Asian research institution, teaching only the contemporary post-1975 Northern Vietnamese language form would seem to limit the research capabilities and opportunities for our graduate students and post-doctoral researchers that may want to conduct research in areas outside of urban Hanoi, such as in the central highlands or the Mekong Delta, to name a few possibilities. It would also seem to limit these scholars, to some extent, to only researching the contemporary period rather than say, early 20th Century French colonial Indochinese Saigon literature or ethnic Chinese Vietnamese acculturation in Cho Lon. At the same time, it would nevertheless be advantageous for our students to be open to and reasonably conversant in the current official Vietnamese language form in order to more easily navigate, negotiate and maneuver their training abroad.

While the American university often presumes political neutrality in the classroom, the politics of the instructor do manifest themselves in daily instruction. In the Vietnamese language classroom context, each time a student uses different diction or utters pronunciation differently from the instructor’s chosen dialect of instruction, the instructor’s choice whether to “correct” the student or to use this opportunity to “educate” all the students about equally valuable and historically legitimate regional dialect differences reveals a politically loaded positionality. Not only is the teacher’s regional pronunciation always readily audible, but her/his openness and fairness to students’ family backgrounds is quite a sensitive register for undergraduate and graduate students alike. My own experiences with students reporting insensitive treatment by other instructors, or anger from their parents and family when they return home speaking and sporting an entirely altered and “foreign” accent in the household, or infantilization and

condescension in the classroom, come in the form of weepy office hours visits from old students. Even graduate students from diverse academic institutions throughout the U.S. register complaints to me on occasion at conferences regarding programs with instruction by both Vietnamese and Vietnamese American instructors untrained in cultural sensitivity.⁹

An additional need for this kind of sustained engagement with Vietnamese regional politics and immigration history is also evident in our current structuring of international education abroad programs most prevalent in Hanoi at this time. I will confine my discussion here to the University of California's foreign study initiatives, but the concern applies to other similar university educational travel programs. We have heard from many of our education abroad proponents and representatives about the political complications of promotion of foreign language programs in Hanoi to Vietnamese American students and their parents, who continue to have conflicted feelings toward Hanoi that prevent them from final commitments to the program. Even when undergraduate students have formally applied and been accepted, their families often veto their final decisions to study in Hanoi. There exists a misconception that this older generation of extremist anti-communist nay-sayers will eventually subside with age in their complaints and that with the younger generations, this conflict will resolve itself. Yet, we have seen in every Little Saigon community protest the growing numbers of staunchly anti-communist youth present in each demonstration, and we know from Vietnamese history that many of these youths are direct offspring of prisoners of the Vietnamese "re-education camps" who grow up living with and listening to the stories of their parents and grandparents.

We also know that for many undergraduates interested in "going back" to the "homeland," their draw is to see as much of the country as possible, whereas in graduate education, the pull might be to entrench oneself in the current intellectual climate of Hanoi. Education abroad programs need to take into consideration and re-evaluate what is most useful in their approach to promoting such a program, when it remains centered in a site that becomes a constant reminder to Vietnamese American families of all they have lost in the Vietnam War. We sincerely believe that making changes in such programs does not attempt to simply impose alternative political historical positions, but rather, such changes will contribute to the long-term institutional effectiveness and value of the Education Abroad Programs (EAP) in Vietnam and the spread of its popularity amongst our students. Many of us belong to research programs dependent upon and thoroughly invested in research exchange with Vietnam, and we want to do what we can to ensure the continuation of EAP. Though we understand the prior need to focus energy on strengths, such as a program's secure home base in Hanoi, it is an appropriate, and in fact a crucial, moment to re-assess and build onto our current EAP institutional networks in order to ensure its survival.

Making available connections to multiple universities in all three regional centers in Northern, Central and Southern Vietnam will assist EAP directors in researching possibilities for future growth and ensure that our intellectual pursuits remain in the vanguard of Vietnamese cultural education. Some excellent examples of this gradual

liberalization of education abroad include the Group of Universities for the Advancement of Vietnamese Abroad (GUAVA)'s expansion of its Vietnamese Advanced Summer Institute (VASI)'s summer intensive graduate language program to both Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City in the last several years, Yale University's recent summer program to Hue under the directorship of Quang Phu Van, and the University of California Education Abroad Program's recent addition of a summer program to Hue and intended summer program to Can Tho under the directorship of the University of California, Riverside's David Biggs. Rather than protectionist gate-keeping, it is through this kind of recuperative opening up of cultural and intellectual geopolitical borders in our curricular activities that we can truly explore globally democratic cultural historical education.

Limitations of Instructional Resource Materials

Another variable in our classroom instruction involves the geopolitical slant of resources and instructional materials. To elaborate on some examples, some texts have pronunciation guides specific to one regional dialect, while others might include cultural narratives or descriptions of customs and memorial sites from only one Vietnamese region. This regional focus can be said to be inevitable in any early language textbook development for practical and logistical purposes, but an added dimension of such textbooks is that they often also limit their cultural education and historical background to the same limited regional focus even in subsequent editions. Our textbooks need to be inclusive of the diversity of Vietnamese national historiography; otherwise, we are not teaching students the whole of Vietnamese culture as a varied, complex and provocative national culture worthy of more in-depth investigation and interest.

One might also imagine how Vietnamese diasporic histories and cultures could feed into such curriculum to further engage and strengthen heritage student engagement. We need to process with care the gender balance of assigned materials, when heroic historical subjects seem to follow a familiarly masculine nationalist disposition, while the supplementary figures of female heroism continually sacrifice themselves for their lovers and for the nation-state. We need to be cautious of our seemingly benign classroom examples of how Vietnamese "men" behave or how Vietnamese "women" seduce lovers, when such politically loaded gendered and exoticized comments no longer carry the same sway with our feminist or queer Vietnamese American heritage students, for example. Perhaps the most controversial and problematic political slant in the Vietnamese American heritage learning communities is attention to communist and anti-communist sentiments of textbooks and other class resources. In the Philippine American context, comparable pro-American versus Pilipina/o nationalist sovereignty sentiments in the materials might be discerned with the utmost scrutiny.

While Vietnamese beginning language instructional textbooks are quite accessible in the United States and are authored by highly qualified Vietnamese American language professionals, they display a huge variation in methodological and pedagogical approach. The authors devise and design these texts based on their localized student demographic and institutional needs, so there is little consensus or standardization across them. Some instructors see little cause to conform to others' conceptual frameworks, nationally or

even across state systems. Though other co-authored Vietnamese beginners and conversational textbooks did exist prior to COTSEAL's *The Vietnamese Language Learning Framework* by Binh N. Ngo of Harvard University and Bac Hoai Tran of the University of California, Berkeley (*Journal of Southeast Asian Language and Teaching* Vol. X December 2001), it was one of the first to attempt to inject both a linguistic approach along with cultural pragmatics into a widely applicable and user-friendly downloadable format. GUAVA members are currently working on advanced language instructional materials, as well as revising online proficiency analysis resources, both necessary directions for the continued growth of Vietnamese language instruction. The University of California system is currently designing a system-wide heritage language learning web-based portal in curricular alignment with its sister campuses in Vietnam, which includes resources for most common heritage learner difficulties, Vietnamese regional cultural political background, as well as early Vietnamese American sociological scholarship for language instructors. The most useful and pedagogically sound of these and other materials will take into consideration the aforementioned cultural political history.

Federal and Local Funding Biases

Funding channels and the bureaucracy of formal institutionalization of language instruction in the United States betrays the federal government's low regard and respect for language education and multilingualism altogether. Most federal funding sources do not promote widespread instructional development, only giving large amounts of developmental assistance to Title VI institutions, or large research oriented programs. As a joint U.S. Department of Education Title VI National Resource Center for Southeast Asian Studies, the University of California, Los Angeles and the University of California, Berkeley form one of only roughly seven Title VI National Resource Centers for Southeast Asia in the United States and the only such center in California. Yet the usual incentive for heritage language implementation is large demographic concentrations in large ethnic sprawls, which do not necessarily find themselves in close proximity to or in the vicinity of large, well-funded higher educational research institutions. Private foundations tend to fund institutions with matching capabilities in order to ensure better returns on their investments, and these also do not necessarily trickle down to smaller Vietnamese language programs.

Another funding problem associated specifically with heritage languages is the assumption that local ethnic community contributions and endowments will provide for institutional development of their respective language programs. Administrators will use the examples of Ukrainian and Armenian communities that have managed to fundraise millions of dollars to build and supplement such languages. In this administrative logic, the university only provides a service for the specific ethnic community in support of the community's cultural retention, which is not seen as a necessary obligation or responsibility. North American universities often seek monetary donations and endowed teaching positions from heritage communities in order to fund these programs. This is a different message from one in which the languages of these diverse cultures are thought to enrich the internationalizing university classroom and thereby, provide a service to the

status and reputation of the university, itself, in an age of ever-rapid globalization. The latter would entail funding from the university and the state, rather than from the heritage community. In the case of Southeast Asian language communities, this funding logic also reveals a lack of awareness about the actual lived socioeconomic conditions and realities of these communities, communities often consisting of many lower-income and newer immigrants.

Finally, the lack of respect for language instruction in the United States reveals itself in the hierarchical treatment of language instructors in academic institutions, with very few tenure-track faculty positions in language pedagogy.¹⁰ In conversations with language instructors of other Southeast and East Asian languages, many nervously admit that they are unable to speak out about any programmatic concerns or instructional difficulties out of unspoken fears regarding job security. Because many are temporary part-time employees or annually contracted full-time lecturers, they have very little recourse other than to follow institutional lines. There seems to be some further unspoken recognition of familiar racial and gender patterns along language education hierarchies.

On the other end of the hierarchical spectrum, a tenure-track professor in literature or culture, such as I, is presumed by the university to also easily manage language instruction. While I can and am willing to teach beginning Vietnamese language courses occasionally, in order to exchange cultural course opportunities with our Vietnamese language instructors if they wish to teach them, in no way do I feel as highly qualified to teach Vietnamese language. The misapprehension that language teaching is somehow easier than other disciplinary education is faulty and ignores the amount of labor involved in class preparation, course materials, grading and testing, further exploiting the image of our language instructors as cogs in the language machinery of the university.

Institutional Infrastructural Dilemmas of U.S.-based Language Instruction

Because the previously mentioned belief that heritage languages perform a community service pervades not only the institutions of higher education but also the diasporic communities themselves, Vietnamese language teaching first found footing in local Catholic/Christian churches and Buddhist temples. While these disparate and sometimes informal offerings saw the gratitude of two generations of Vietnamese American families, these opportunities were not without their own pedagogical difficulties and funding shortages. If they remain in the communities, they will continue to be marginalized from formal K-12 and higher educational circuits. Of utmost importance to our Southeast Asian language programs is developing a coordinated effort to strategize and mobilize the existing disciplinary and interdisciplinary infrastructures already in place rather than continuing this separation of intellectual higher education and community-based language instruction. Strong research programs need to actively promote “language teaching machines,” solidified foreign study or education abroad programs, and combined goals and shared responsibilities with K-12 education. Some of these concerns have already begun to be addressed in junior high and high school educational curricula in the State of California, and we can benefit from what has transformed in those contexts. The stronger the secondary education students receive in

Vietnamese language and the more accreditation they receive for such instruction toward college credits or units, the smoother our instructional transitions will become.

It is our belief that we need to educate ourselves on this transition and these intersections with secondary education in the State of California in order to work together toward progress without unnecessary duplication of work. For this reason, we find that we can benefit from better articulation with educational consultation from K-12 teachers and administrators who will get us up to speed on such developments in secondary and higher education advancement. Our outreach to K-12 education in the way of educational curricular issues and college preparatory credit will sustain long-range investment in the continued growth and breadth of Vietnamese language instruction. In the city of Garden Grove, for example, three high schools already have existing Vietnamese language programs in place that encourage intellectual engagement with cultural knowledge and expertise from an early age and into higher education.¹¹

Moreover, sociological studies have shown that “native language retention may be associated with continual contact with new arrivals, living with household members with limited English, and residence in Vietnamese communities,” but that more importantly, “native language retention is strongly associated with adaptive rather than maladaptive outcomes”:

This finding falls in line with previous research, which shows that ethnic language abilities contribute to greater overall scholastic achievement (Cummins 1991; Lindholm and Aclan 1991; Willig 1985)... These findings tell us that advanced ethnic language skills can connect children to a system of ethnic supports that encourage and direct accomplishments by promoting effort and reinforcing attitudes conducive to learning.¹²

In the case of heritage languages, the role of our student audience plays a crucial function in the implementation and maintenance of language programs. These students seek instructors who show a passion for cultural linkages and a commitment to social and academic equality, and the students become disenchanted with language instruction if they do not sense this commitment. In some language education circles, much gets blamed on the very fast turnover rate of students and how this affects the institutional memory of the language initiatives at a given institution.

Another determining factor in the kind of language instruction available is the kind of political and intellectual guidance these students receive from their supporters. To elaborate on one example, I describe the case of Kababayan, the Pilipina/o student organization at the University of California, Irvine (UCI) made up of very enthusiastic and politicized students, but with intermittent advising and institutional support. From roughly 1997-2001, there was an intense push by various constituents of the academic and local Southeast Asian and South Asian American communities in Southern California to introduce these heritage languages into the UCI curriculum. For two of these four years, a group called the South and Southeast Asian Languages Coalition (SSEALC) joined forces to demand the development of Vietnamese, Tagalog and Hindi

language course offerings. In the midst of this drive, Kababayan pulled out of the coalition, which subsequently yielded a successful Vietnamese language program however tenuously situated in the East Asian Literatures and Cultures Department. Leadership within the Kababayan cabinet expressed their reasons for withdrawal as having to do with the difficulties and complexities surrounding their identity politics in relation to the disciplinary markers of the university. They neither felt at ease identifying Tagalog as a Southeast Asian language or a Pacific Islander language, and they had conflicted feelings about a preponderance of existing Philippine scholarship in English. While I could completely understand and empathize with their concerns, such familiar “identity issues” have been the subject of countless hours of ethnic studies and American studies classroom discussions. Regardless of whether or not this cohort of students identified with Southeast Asian area studies, the fact remained that there exists a huge body of scholarship about the Philippines written in Tagalog, as well as in Spanish and English for that matter. The failure of this particular Tagalog push, in my estimation, had to do with a glaring lack of consistent institutional (departmental and administrative) support for such organizing and a failure in communication between organization advisors, campus research programs that focus on such intellectual and academic complexities, and the students.

In a more productive comparative example, Katipunan, the Pilipina/o student organization at the University of California, Riverside was fortunate to see more fruitful implementation of Tagalog language course offerings in a shorter period of time, as a result of combined efforts on the part of students, faculty, staff, affiliated departments, the local community and the university administration. Because this language program developed in tandem with a Southeast Asian research program and because such a program had additional support from affiliated departments like Comparative Literature and Foreign Languages, student leaders were able to rally and maintain close communication with academic counselors (program directors, department chairs and deans), as well as the ethnic community at large. After an initial two-year trial period of course offerings located in University Extension services, the students, staff, faculty and community members and local small businesses made a second successful bid to include the Tagalog curriculum within the official Foreign Languages Program, ensuring more self-sustained funding and administration. This drive would not have reached its goals without the institutional and intellectual openness of supportive departments willing to house that language program, or without local community business and faculty pressure to provide foundational infrastructure for research-oriented programmatic growth, as opposed to a mere provision of heritage “services” only.

For all of these larger political economic considerations, then, our goals in Southeast Asian and Vietnamese language instruction need to be manifold. First, we need to improve system instruction at all levels with educational and pedagogical instruction and teacher training in order to balance out our quality of teaching across the systems, and to ensure adequate enrollment in Intermediate and Advanced language courses. Sound pedagogical principals in cultural difference and gender diversity will improve the quality of instruction and teach our instructors how to be mindful of student needs and mutual respect in the language classroom. Future language programs might provide curricular

training for instructors and educational resource materials that specifically address and integrate regional politics in the study and teaching of Vietnamese language, which is of paramount importance to the fields of language, literature and translation study, and will ultimately bring about the much-needed adjustments in our curricula. These curricular changes will strengthen the necessary foundations and ensure that language teaching is taken more seriously in the United States academy. At the same time, those of us in tenure-track or tenured positions with commitments to language pedagogy must continue to advocate on behalf of our language instructors and to gradually change the macro-sociopolitical perceptions of language education's place in personal, intellectual, academic and global cultural edification.¹³

Notes

¹ James M. Freeman, *Changing Identities: Vietnamese Americans, 1975-1995*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995, 51.

² The 1.5 generation refers to those Vietnamese who departed from Vietnam at an early age and therefore are more likely to retain certain memories, experiences, and legacies of home cultures, but who have also grown up immersed in the social and cultural mores of their diasporic national homes. In Asian Pacific American Studies, the 1.5 generation has been a commonly accepted sociological phenomenon since the early 1980s, and suggests many commonalities across more recent immigration to the United States from Southeast Asia, as well as from Latin America, Eastern Europe and the global south, more generally. As a generalized whole, 1.5 generation Vietnamese American youths are characterized as having difficult negotiations with their two cultures, or their biculturality.

³ Freeman, 56.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

⁵ Within the last ten to fifteen years in Vietnam, there have been increasing numbers and now countless educational tutoring facilities that cater to a wealthier clientele with aims of sending their children abroad or employing these future breadwinners in tourist-related occupational sectors in which formal quality bilingualism is an asset and commodity. This observation comes from my other ethnographic fieldwork on cultural development in Vietnam from 2001-2006.

⁶ The conclusions about heritage language students from this section are gleaned from 1) discussions with 12 Vietnamese American instructors of Vietnamese language and 6 Pinay/Pinoy instructors of Filipino/Tagalog, 2) my own discussions with undergraduate and graduate Vietnamese language students, as program coordinator for the Vietnamese Language Program at the University of California, Riverside, and 3) in my teaching of Vietnamese literature and language, Vietnamese American culture, and Southeast Asian studies courses.

⁷ For more historical reading on linguistic evolution and language and literary development, see *South East Asia Languages and Literatures: A Select Guide* (Eds. Patricia Herbert and Anthony Milner. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989) and *Southeast Asian Languages and Literatures: A Bibliographic Guide to Burmese,*

Cambodian, Indonesian, Javanese, Malay, Minangkabau, Thai, and Vietnamese, edited by E. Ulrich Kratz. New York: I.B.Tauris, 1996.

⁸ For further reading, see M.L. Pratt's "Building a New Public Idea About Language" in *Profession* (2003): 110-119.

⁹ This information was passed onto me by coordinators of past intensive summer language programs in Vietnam, as well as graduate student participants in such programs.

¹⁰ Very few universities, such as the University of Hawaii, the University of Wisconsin and Ohio University offer tenure-track positions in language instruction.

¹¹ Garden Grove High, Bolsa Grande High and La Quinta High Schools in California.

¹² Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston III, *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998, 128.

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For Further Reading

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