

The Things We Carried

By Quan Tue Tran

The summer I turned thirteen, my family arrived in the US as political refugees. My father had fought for the Republic of Vietnam (RVN/South Vietnam) alongside the US during the infamous war in Vietnam. The war ended in 1975 with the defeat of the US and RVN, leading to the communist takeover of South Vietnam. The new regime sent members of the losing side, among whom included my father, to the so-called "reeducation camps," which were hard labor camps designed to indoctrinate and punish those who had supported the RVN and the US. This imprisonment and the subsequent discriminations that my family faced in the postwar years turned us into political refugees in search of a safer elsewhere. The involvement of the US in the war in Vietnam forged the path for us to immigrate to America.

Crossing the Pacific, our family of seven brought with us what we could collectively fit into two aluminum trunks, each the size of a large suitcase. Given the limited space, we children could bring only a few items from the homeland. I brought a souvenir gifted to me by my best friend in elementary school to remind me of our friendship. My sisters packed their favorite Vietnamese teen and kid magazines and books. My father also brought a small collection of the classics that he liked to read as well as two dictionaries--Vietnamese-English and English-Vietnamese. My mother brought some jewelries from her mother and cassette tapes of her favorite songs. My paternal grandparents brought our ancestral censer with us, but they had to leave it behind with my aunt at the airport because the authority considered it an antique, which could not be taken out of the country without government permission. We also brought family photo albums and vital records along with several changes of clothing.

It has been nearly three decades since we left our homeland. In that span of time, my family has moved many times within the US. Each of us still held on to the items that we had carefully packed and brought with us from Vietnam. Not only are they mementoes of the life and relationships that we had left behind, they have also consistently been our companions in our journeys of adjusting to a new land, providing us with some comfort in times when we have felt the pangs of homesickness or the isolation of life as refugees in America. In the more recent years, my grandparents and mother have passed away and my sisters and I inherited not only their belongings but also the stories and memories that are attached to those objects. They have become our family's humble heirlooms and a part of our family's lore. The things that we have carried to this country will in turn carry our stories with them into the future and help our descendants forge connections to the homeland that we had left behind.