

“Humans have arrived at the Mekong River”: The story of my grandmother and our future

By Ben Yang

My grandmother's story begins at the Fall of Saigon. The dense cityscape was polluted by a distinct feeling of dread, the source of this feeling parading closer by the hour and the means of escape sparse. This trepidation could be felt throughout the land, deep into the heart of rural southeast Asia. The Hmong, a nomadic group of people who predominately traveled and farmed the mountains of Laos, were unfortunately among the many targeted for persecution and death for aiding the Americans during the Vietnam War. The Viet Cong and Pathet Lao, a left-oriented nationalist group in Laos, pillaged, raped, and hunted the Hmong like wild hogs, the evidence of this evil scorched and bombed out of remembrance. My grandmother, who had just given birth to my mother, fled eastward to Thailand in search of asylum, but her will to survive would be tested as she trekked thousands of miles on foot with only what she could carry.

Her mind would become accustomed to the sticky, wet, and dense jungle terrain that led to salvation, as well as the AK-47 bullets whistling through the mosquito-infested air. Her feet became raw from the sludge, her body exhausted, starved, and fighting disease. Her final obstacle was to cross the Mekong River to Thailand.

The Hmong were certainly damned as most of them could not swim, and it held true as mothers would hold their infants above their heads while they drowned beneath the murky waters. Dead bodies would rest on the river, floating like lily pads, and brothers holding onto makeshift bamboo rafts would watch as their sisters were lost to the raging rush. The Mekong River brought a woeful ending to many souls, but it also served as a passage of hope for the Hmong people. My grandmother survived this trek; shortly after, she spent four years in a refugee camp.

The one thing she always mentions when retelling this part of her story is that through her tribulation, through the deterioration of her body, through all the death that she had encountered, the only thing that consumed her mind was a search for a better life. Resiliency, stripped to its most fundamental element, is the will to survive. My grandmother, a paragon to this notion, was resilient to the depravities of war and exemplifies the will not only to survive, but the will to choose. She chose to continue at every point in her journey, even given the wicked circumstances that were imposed on her.

Many problems that we face today parallel the nature of the evil that chased my grandmother from her home. Climate change is the culmination of human greed, apathy, intolerance, and self-righteous understanding of progress. In some way, our species has become accustomed to this self-destructive terrain, and our earth is slowly perishing from the actions of our indolence and selfishness. Modern-day resiliency requires the understanding that we need to make individual decisions, toward progress, with the awareness that we are on the brink of survival. Humans have arrived at the Mekong River, a junction of choosing to search for a better world. Even if prosperity and safety is not guaranteed, we must escape our very own malice nature.

Displaced from her home, my grandmother's story continues in America. Her first place of residency was a two-bedroom apartment she shared with other refugees in Long Beach, California. The early years of my grandmother's life in America can be denoted by the tiny room she was living in with her six children. There was only a single ragged twin mattress, so everyone knew only how to sleep with blankets on the hardwood floor. There was no heat or air conditioning, so everyone knew only how to sleep closely together at night for warmth and with no shirts to stay cool. There wasn't much money for food, so everyone knew only the taste of bread and sugar. Outside of her tiny bedroom they were confronted by even more struggles, with racism, prejudice, and sexual harassment.

My grandmother did not travel so far to live like this. But she was subject to a system that did not want interference. She would wake early mornings to forage dumpsters and garbage cans, digging through piles of waste in the hope of finding small plastic caps and aluminum cans she could exchange for money. Eventually she saved enough to buy a cheap rusted tricycle, which was fit for a six-year-old. Her days were monotonous and strenuous, a schedule of carrying bundles of pop cans, each bundle adeptly tied to the back of her tricycle, the wheels creaking with every turn, all the way across town to the urban farming plots. Her days would end when the sun set, her fingernails stained with dirt, and she would navigate herself back into town as her bag clattered behind. Eventually she joined a Christian church, where she found faith, prayer, and a community of people who experienced the same level of suffering. She would say these were the days when prosperity felt possible.

Resiliency is the quality of immersing oneself in a tedium that strives for change. The opposing system, which we must first recognize as a parallel to the current institutions that govern the social and economic infrastructure of our world, is opposed to change. Systematic change requires clever, assertive, and considerate planning. We should understand, as individuals and as a collective, we create the most forceful impact through creative, little ideas. In the ability to engage in small projects, which can often be difficult, niche, and boring. Only then will we see beneficial change. Passion is about truly finding something essential to your existence—seeking no fame or glory, but a keen sense of serenity.

I believe my grandmother found serenity in the monotony of her life. It is not until we recognize that we must not only evolve from having the will to survive, but we must evolve to creating a life filled with passion that can be shared with others. My grandmother shared her life through farming and providing food for her community family. Only then will we find prosperity.

My grandmother's story ends in Minnesota, where she resides as an 85-year-old farmer. It should be noted that my grandmother lived a sustainable life as well, only consuming all that she truly needed and never wasting anything. She understood the nuances of farming and the reciprocal nature of life systems on earth. She cared deeply for the land even when it was unforgiving, and she cared deeply for the people who shared this sentiment. However, this writing is not explicitly about how my grandmother was sustainable, or even how we can be more sustainable as a species. This is not just about sustainability. I write to emphasize the importance of the human will, which is something that can determine the level and impact of sustainability. This writing is about how we can reflect more

about the world we live in and form self-aware choices and understandings. This writing is meant to signify the capabilities of a single individual and how they can inspire others.

So, I write to say that I am deeply inspired by my grandmother's story and the story of my people. I'm drawn to reflect upon the desolation that my ancestors felt when desperately trying to escape the calamities of war and how their throats would choke on the ashes of their homes. Upon the foreboding visions of my children experiencing the desolation of the environment, where their throats burn from the ashes of the world. Upon the present. It is important to detail my grandmother's life and read it like a well-crafted book because these stories are what inspire. In the end, I understand that I must remain resilient as my ancestors did before me and inspire this resilience in the generations that will come after me.

In my humility do I recognize the burden that I have been given, the lessons that have been passed down generations before me, the understanding that through all this change I should choose to search for resilience in the everyday.

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