

The First Vietnamese to Attend Harvard

Chris Norlund¹

Abstract

This article tells the story of the first Vietnamese, Ngo Vinh Long, to attend Harvard as an undergraduate student in 1964. Long taught himself English by reading novels he purchased at an outdoor market translating them with an English-French dictionary. After coming to the states, he became one of the few Vietnamese to speak out against the war while residing in the U.S.

Keywords: migration, immigration, Asian American studies, international education, Vietnam War.

Introduction

In 2003, the *New York Times* reported that the Harvard Law School made history by hiring Elena Kagan to be the inaugural female dean in the law school's 186-year history (Dillon, 2003). It also reported that Harvard Law did not admit a woman into its ranks until 1953—which is not inconceivable considering the landmark desegregation case, *Brown v. Board*, was in 1954. After completing my read of the *New York Times*, I sat with my morning coffee and began to wonder. When did a Vietnamese make history at Harvard? Who was the first Vietnamese come to American in order to attend Harvard? I take special interest in this topic because I myself am an orphan/refugee from Vietnam.²

I explored my question further and met with my advisor at Brown, Professor Robert G. Lee. Professor Lee attended Brown in the 1960s and remembered travelling to Harvard to hear a Vietnamese student speak on the war. I did some

¹ Chris Norlund, University of Pennsylvania, 3629 Powelton Avenue, 1st Floor Front, Philadelphia, PA 19104. Email: norlund@dolphin.upenn.edu.

² My migration to America was part of the 1975 Operation Babylift in which the U.S. military airlifted some 2,000 orphan children to the U.S. and other countries.

digging and discovered a news story from a 1964 *Boston Globe*; the article described a newly admitted Vietnamese undergraduate—I had found the needle in the haystack. What follows is the engaging and remarkable story of Ngo Vinh Long, the first Vietnamese to attend Harvard and one of the first Vietnamese to speak out against the Vietnam War while residing in the United States. I was able to record the oral history of Dr. Ngo during a two-day interview at his home residence in which I recorded approximately nine hours of dialogue. I used mostly opened ended questions and focused most of the conversation on the years leading up to his enrolment at Harvard. I was also able to interview Temple University Professor Emeritus and former Ambassador from Saigon Tran Van Dinh at his home residence; Dr. Tran shared anecdotes and oral history about the Vietnamese in American during the 1960s. In addition to interviews, I have used a variety of news articles to corroborate events.³ The result is an oral history of Ngo Vinh Long using direct quotes from him and interpreting many of the stories he shared with me. The purpose of this article is to give a visceral account of Ngo Vinh Long's migration to the U.S. as a student to attend Harvard.

In 1964, Long came at a time when only 82,045 foreign students were studying in the U.S.⁴ It is difficult to determine when the very first Vietnamese would have come to America to attend college; however, it was perhaps as early as in 1952. In 1956, Dieu Huu Khuong was awarded a fellowship for graduate study at M.I.T.; Dieu had attended undergraduate degree at Lafayette in Pennsylvania before moving on to graduate school (Times, 1956). Additionally,

³ Many of the ideas and perspectives that Dr. Ngo shared with me about the Vietnam War vary from the American version of the Vietnam War which is told by American historians. Vietnamese-American voices on the Vietnam War have largely been silent in academia, but will become more pervasive as young Vietnamese scholars (mostly children of refugees) will advance through the ranks of academia.

⁴ Which is a relatively small number compared to the 586,323 foreign students studying in the U.S. in 2003. Open Doors, International Institute of Education

THE FIRST VIETNAMESE TO ATTEND HARVARD

in 1954, a little over twenty Vietnamese students studying in the U.S. staged a protest in front of the White House—quite possibly this could have been a sizeable proportion of the Vietnamese student population in the U.S. (Times, 1954). The early 1950s would probably have been the earliest that Vietnamese would have come to the states to undertake undergraduate study. Few Vietnamese spoke English and America was mostly closed to foreign students (from Asia and Europe) during WWII.

The 1964 *Globe* article I discovered was entitled “Politics Delayed Student’s Trip to Harvard” (Ungar, 1964). Prominent in the article was a large photo of a young Vietnamese man and two airline flight attendants waving conspicuously to the cameras; the description read, “From Saigon, Long Ngo Vinh, 17, arrives at Logan Airport.” The story then began “Long Vinh Ngo...” the newspaper twice printed his name ordering incorrect, as the proper ordering of his name was actually Ngo Vinh Long (Vietnamese family name placed first). This was analogous to how little Americans knew of basic Vietnamese culture and customs; even though by this time, President Johnson had already asked for congressional support to conduct military action in Southeast Asia following the Tonkin Gulf incident.⁵ Even in 1970, six years after Long’s arrival to the states, there was still a dereliction of scholars interested in Vietnam. Professor John K. Fairbank, director of Harvard’s East Asia Research Center, stated:

It is fantastic that with our educational resources and our Government’s commitment in Vietnam, we are so backward. It has meant misjudgement of the enemy, a very serious problem. If we had known about the Vietnamese the way we knew of Britain, we would have known that a few months of bombing would not make them give up. (Times, 1970)

⁵ “After consultation with the leaders of both parties in the Congress, I further announced a decision to ask the Congress for a resolution expressing the unity and determination of the United States in supporting freedom and in protecting peace in Southeast Asia.” *President Johnson’s Message to Congress. August 5, 1964.*

At the time, only six colleges offered Vietnamese language and less than 30 students were studying the language (Ibid). As the *Globe* misreported Long's name order, this was a greater representation of how little Americans knew about the Vietnamese. Margaret Mead expressed the need for understanding among cultures in order to reduce the threat of war, we "must know what the Chinese mothers say to their babies and how they hold them, to develop their special virtues; and what the Russian mothers say to their babies and how they hold them, to develop theirs" (Mead, 1942).

Long's acceptance to Harvard was extraordinary because he came from a non-English speaking country (Long explained how he was one of only a handful of such students); because Long had no mechanism in Vietnam to formally learn English, he largely self-taught himself the language. Long was self-educated by memorizing, "British novels, ranging from classics to Agatha Christie."⁶ He laboriously learned proper pronunciations from playing old phonograph records called "English without Toil" that were given to him by a Christian missionary. From an early age Long had displayed a propensity for language, which as his story unfolds gave him many opportunities and advantages not available to other Vietnamese.

Besides Long's unique mastery of language, his story is different from other early Vietnamese in America because of his political stance; he was the first Vietnamese-American (although not officially a U.S. citizen at the time) to publicly speak out against the war in Vietnam. His anti-war stance was drastically different from the other three hundred fifty Vietnamese living stateside in the 1960s.⁷ At the time, about

⁶ Quotes are directly taken from the interview with Ngo Vinh Long, unless otherwise stated.

⁷ This number and numbers of Vietnamese political stances are an approximation from interviews collected from Ngo Vinh Long and Temple University Professor Emeritus and former Ambassador from Saigon Tran Van Dinh in 2003. During an interview with Dinh, he described Long as "the best" source to gather oral history regarding the first Vietnamese in America. Dinh also stated that while working at the embassy he routinely

THE FIRST VIETNAMESE TO ATTEND HARVARD

one-third of the Vietnamese population living in America were the sons and daughters of the Vietnamese aristocracy—children whom would not dare criticize the war because it brought endangerment to their families back in Vietnam. The other two-thirds of the Vietnamese living in America would not speak out against the war because they were diplomats and other government officials with close ties to the American government. Hence, as a free thinking student at Harvard, Long was in a distinctive position when compared to other Vietnamese in America because he came to the U.S. without strong social or the political entanglements that would have otherwise prevented him from protesting the war. In contrast, there were approximately 5,000 Vietnamese students studying in Paris, many of whom self-described children of the elite (Clos, 1964) with views supporting U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Not all Vietnamese in Paris necessarily supported the U.S.; however, since many were children of the South Vietnamese government officials and elite—a regime backed by the U.S—they were much more likely to be pro-American.

Growing Up in Vietnam

Ngo Vinh Long—meaning *distinguished dragon*—was born in 1944 in the Bac Ninh Province along the Mekong Delta ninety miles south of Saigon (Long was not entirely sure about his precise birth date because his real age was concealed by his family to help him avoid service in the military). Long described the ancient history of his family as a family of academics, “The Ngo family began around the 10th century. And our family was very famous because it produced a stream of scholars.” His family made a conscious decision not to work for the French or any government. “After the 18th century, there is a saying in my family: [translated] Even if you take exams and pass exams you should not take them, because if you take the exams you will be asked to become bureaucrats. So my family has a tradition

had access to the list of names of Vietnamese living in the states. Although this number is difficult to verify, it is most likely accurate.

of not working for [any] governments.” Despite his family’s extensive history of staying out of politics and bureaucracies, Long broke the trend of family history when he would later work for the U.S. government while in his teens. Long’s willingness to work for the U.S. came from his father’s teachings about American history and politics.

Long’s childhood is parallel to the tragic history of Vietnam. He grew up with the uncertain future of a battered country and his home village was encircled by war and decimation. His father, Ngo Ngoc Thung, and mother, Hothi Ngoc Vien, routinely went into hiding during the Indochina Wars (1946-1954) when the French patrolled the villages drafting Vietnamese peasants to fight the war to re-colonize.⁸ Because of these political circumstances, Long became self-sufficient at a young age; there were no elderly family members to take care of him and for weeks at a time—when his parents went into hiding—he and his two siblings were forced to fend for themselves. His father, Thung, would sometimes be forced to hide an entire day underwater while breathing through a bamboo stick for fear of being discovered by the French. Thung was forced to perpetually elude the French because he was a well known-revolutionary; he had worked as a miner organizing the workers and also served in the Vietminh as a teacher. Even though the Ngo family was traditionally apolitical, it was clear that during the post-WWII Vietnam, Thung was opposed to French occupation and raised his son to believe in a Vietnam for Vietnamese—a rally cry often used by Vietnamese nationals.

Throughout Long’s adolescent years, death continued to surround his village. Early childhood experiences sensitized

⁸ “All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” *President Ho Chi Minh delivered the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence on September 2, 1945 beginning with a quote from the American Declaration of Independence. This declaration started the Indochina wars after the conclusion of WWII. The French wishing to maintain control of Vietnam began drafting Vietnamese to be used against other Vietnamese fighting for independence.*

THE FIRST VIETNAMESE TO ATTEND HARVARD

Long about the horrors of war and would later fuel his desire to end the war in Vietnam. He described childhood memories of rotting corpses, “bloated big like a buffalo, black, horrible, scary,” floating in the ponds in his village; Long hated the French for killing so many of his people. His father tried to assuage his son’s hatred by telling him the French were not a malicious people, rather it was the French government and its policies that were hurting Vietnam. Long found it very difficult to believe his father’s affable words of the French; however, he did accept the things his father told him of America. Thung regularly told him America was “the beautiful country” and “interracially harmonious country,” which was a loose translation analogy of the U.S. melting pot theory. Long imagined America to be the ideal country and dreamed of one day immigrating there. These American stories Long was told in his adolescent years became the foundation of his drive to learn English, which became the vehicle he would use to go from Vietnamese villager to Harvard undergraduate.

Learning English

Long’s continuing fascination with America led him to study the “language of the interracially harmonious country;” however, this task was next to impossible for anyone living in 1950s Vietnam. Thung had trained his son in mathematics and French, but was unable to teach his son English because he himself did not speak the language. The two agreed it would be beneficial for Long to become adept in English and together they journeyed to Saigon in search of English language textbooks. On the road to Saigon, the pair met several travellers in need of direction. At age six, Long was literate in both French and Vietnamese, so he read street signs for otherwise illiterate travellers. In return for his remarkable ability to read and give directions at a young age, travellers would give him a few piasters for his service. By the time the two reached Saigon, Long had been given so many piasters he had to find some way to carry them all. He eventually filled an entire bombshell with piasters, which

was more than enough money to buy several books. This weapon of war (which he casually found on the side of the road) was now ironically being used as a canister to hold money for his English education. This moment in Long's life is iconic of how he was able to use the anger of war and transform it into the language of peace.

After arriving in Saigon, they could not find any English textbooks nor could they find an English-Vietnamese dictionary—chances are at this time it would have been difficult to find one in America. However, they were able to buy a French-English pocket dictionary, which had been left over from when the Americans transported the French back to Vietnam to reclaim her lost colony, following Japanese defeat at the conclusion of WWII. Armed with their new dictionary, Long and Thung translated several titles of English language novels for sale in Saigon's outdoor marketplace. At the time "not too many people would buy them [English language books], because they couldn't read them." Because no one could read any of the books, English language books were very economical; this allowed Long to buy several books at an affordable price. He bought a variety of authors; however, they purchased mostly British classics, including Shakespeare, Jane Austen, the Bronte Sisters, and Charles Dickens. The first title to catch his imagination was Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, and it became the first of many books he would read and memorize.

"So my father and I started memorizing *Great Expectations* first word for word, then sentence by sentence, page by page. After a year we memorized most of *Great Expectations*." When telling this story, Long elegantly recited the opening passage of the novel as if he were reading the words directly from the page, "'my father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name being Phillip...so I called myself Pip.' And that's how we learned how to speak English. I still have a slight accent now because I never had a teacher."

While the two were in Saigon studying English language, the French arrested his father. Thung was held in custody and tortured horribly because of his refusal to cooperate.

THE FIRST VIETNAMESE TO ATTEND HARVARD

The French soon realized physical torture would not succeed in converting him, so they tried a new approach. His father was to be taken out on patrols. During the patrols, French soldiers murdered and beheaded Vietnamese villagers. His father was then ordered to attach a piece of twine to the head's ears and carry it until the twine ripped from the flesh. This was one of the torture methods the French used on his father, but his father never conceded. The French finally released Thung after he contracted tuberculosis from the several months of torment. Thung was never the same person after this experience. What was surprising was when Long told the story of his father's torture, he spoke in a matter of fact way. Discussing the brutality of the French did not stun Long because it was what he had grown up with; for the Vietnamese living in this era, it was a fact of life. War was everyday reality.

In 1952, after a year of recovery, his father got a job working as a stationmaster at a train station. While living in the train station, Long was also afflicted with tuberculosis and was bed ridden for the next two years. While lying in bed, Long passed the time teaching himself English by memorizing the books he and his father had stored in cardboard boxes. Although physically very sick, Long's mind continued to work to an exceptional degree. In 1954, he was awarded a certificate of English proficiency by the Vietnamese government for passing a comprehensive exam; he was only one out of two people who passed that year.

Working for the U.S. Government

When in his teens, a rebellious teenage Long was ashamed of his father's humble lifestyle as train master, so Long lived away from his family. He worked as a private tutor in mathematics and English. "I was tutor to rich people and the ruling elite in Saigon. I was tutoring their children. I would live in my house. I would go from one famous family to the next teaching them." This access to Saigon's upper class made him privy to inside information of what was happening in Vietnam. He frequented the country

clubs and it was there that he met many American officials. In October 1959, he heard the Americans were planning to make military maps of Vietnam. There were few Vietnamese who had expertise in mapmaking, so the U.S. contracted Filipinos and Japanese experts to create maps. The use of foreigners to map Vietnam worried Long. He sent out numerous letters to American military advisors warning against the use of foreigners to survey the Vietnamese countryside.

Long had always been outspoken and zealous in his opinions. “When I heard about this, I said, ‘Hey, you are going to get people killed. In order to go around making maps in the way you are making them, which is walking all over the country. You need to know people who know about the culture and life in the countryside. You will get many people killed very, very quickly that way’ [by sending foreigners].” Long felt Filipinos did not respect women and would get themselves into trouble by using money to pay for sex. He spoke to the American generals regarding his concerns and convinced them to hire him as a public relations officer/mapmaker even though he had no expertise in either. “If you want to do maps I have to be able to do maps, I have to have the technical know how because this would be a good cover for me, so if I get caught out in the countryside by the Vietcong then I tell them I am a technician and prove to them I am a map specialist. Otherwise, if they know I am a [American] public relations officer they would have me killed.” Contrary to family tradition in aiding the French, Long was actively pursuing a position as advisor to the American government.

In December 1959, the Americans sent Long to university in the Philippines to learn mapmaking. “They trained me and within three months I knew everything about mapmaking. I knew mathematics so it was easy and they [Americans] were very impressed.” Long felt it was moral to aid the production of accurate maps because if the Americans were to drop bombs, “they would not bomb the wrong village.” For two years he worked as a mapmaker and willing

THE FIRST VIETNAMESE TO ATTEND HARVARD

accomplice to the Americans. Ironically, it was during his employment with the Americans where he started to question himself and the consequences of American foreign policy. “We measured heights, angles, distances...water levels sometimes. It was during this period that I witnessed what was happening in the countryside. I saw the creation of Agrovilles, the Strategic Hamlet Program, where they put people in concentration camp like homes.”

It was in 1962 when Long came to a crossroads in his life. During one of his mapmaking expeditions, he arrived at the village of Karom (located in central Vietnam north of Phang Rang and south of Cam Ranh Bay). “I witnessed mass starvation in the countryside; tremendous suffering and I began to question myself about what the U.S. efforts in Vietnam really were.” America maintained a controversial policy of defoliating Vietnam’s farmland in efforts to control where food could be grown and hence control its people (Busch, 2002). When Long arrived in Karom, military doctors reported two hundred villagers died of hunger the previous year and the village now suffered from diseases caused by hunger; many more would die. A concerned Long immediately sent word to the U.S. Embassy of what was happening in Karom and asked for immediate medical assistance. “The American Embassy said, ‘Long you are crazy like hell, this is how we defeat the communists.’” Long disagreed.

He continued pleading for help via telegram, and the embassy eventually sent medical doctors to Karom. When the doctors arrived, they said there was nothing they could do and so they left. For the next month Long stayed in Karom, because he felt helping his fellow Vietnamese sustain life was more important than making maps for the U.S. military. He used the money he earned working for the Americans to buy food for the village and he directed efforts to nurse the village back to full health. “People in Saigon were mad like hell and they said I was hired for making maps, I was not hired to become doctor. So I said if this is the way you look at it I resign. And I resigned.” Long’s experience in Karom forever changed him.

Becoming Politically Active

When he returned to Saigon from Karom, Long had organized student demonstrations against the Diem regime. His American contacts warned if he did not stop his anti-government activities he would be arrested. In 1963, with insistence and help from his American contacts, Long left the country and enrolled in a student exchange program in the U.S. for seven months. Leaving Vietnam did not cool Long's temperament as his American contacts had hoped. "While in Joplin, Missouri, I spoke out frankly to the Rotary Club, the Lions Club, the newspapers about if the United States went to war in Vietnam it would be disastrous for the two countries." In June 1964, Long did return to Vietnam. After the death of President Diem, a new constitution was written for South Vietnam in August which gave emergency powers to new President Nguyen Khanh. This included an article ordering all Vietnamese to turn their property over to the military for purpose of defeating the communists (according to Long, using communism to defeat communism made little sense, but this was the norm in Vietnam). Long opposed the new constitution and organized student demonstrations, "We burned copies of the [new] constitution in the streets of Saigon." Student protests were widespread in Vietnam and the New York Times reported as many as 40,000 students were participating (Grose, 1964; United, 1964; Times, 1964). Organizing these demonstrations did put Long's life in danger.

In October 1964, Long did organize a major student protest against the South Vietnamese government. The Saigon police eventually broke up the protest and he was sought after for arrest. "I was chased by the police and I ran into the house of an American general." Long ran to the home of General Maxwell Taylor, then an Ambassador to South Vietnam. The General was not home, but his wife, Lydia answered the door. She invited Long inside without knowing he was evading the police on this particular occasion. She spoke candidly with Long. "She was complaining how the

THE FIRST VIETNAMESE TO ATTEND HARVARD

universities were shut down. How it was disgusting there was no industry. The economy was going to pot. The only industry in Saigon seemed to be the banner industry, student writing banners [of protest].” The last comment she made was jokingly serious.

Mrs. Taylor inquired why he had not applied to go to college in America. Long told her news that he had been accepted to Harvard with a full scholarship (he had applied while on exchange in Joplin, MS), but the South Vietnamese government would not let him leave the country. She was furious, “You are a nice person and you work for us for many years. Harvard. No one can deny you the opportunity to go to Harvard. My grandfather tried to go to Harvard, couldn’t go to Harvard. My whole family...many tried to go to Harvard for many generations, but we couldn’t go there ever. And you have a full scholarship to Harvard and they [South Vietnamese government] will not allow you to go?” She picked up the phone and called the wife of another American General and explained the situation. Three hours later, the Taylor house phone rang. The American Embassy had arranged for Long’s visa and a one-way ticket to Boston. And with that one phone call, Long was on his way to Harvard.

Arriving at Harvard and Conclusion

On Columbus Day, October 12, 1964, Long set foot down in Boston, Massachusetts as if he were an explorer on the moon landing; it was a small step for Long and a leap for Vietnam. “When I arrived at the airport, the stewardesses asked me to be the last person to get out, let other people get out first, I wondered why. Then I step out of the airplane and there on the tarmac was something like 30 or 40 reporters and photographers taking pictures of me like mad: “I became an instant celebrity...the next day my picture appeared in the Harvard Crimson, the Boston Globe, and the Boston Monitor.” Back in Vietnam, the Saigon Post and the Saigon Daily ran front-page stories about Long’s admittance to Harvard accompanied by large photos. According to

Long, reporters asked him how he felt being the first Vietnamese at Harvard: “I was very honoured and at the same time I was very worried. They said, ‘Why are you worried?’ I am worried that the United States will go to war in Vietnam very soon. And if that happens, it will be detrimental to the interests of both countries.”

Long’s frank comments caught the attention of faculty at Harvard: Howard Zinn, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Huntington; plus his words caught the eye of MIT’s Noam Chomsky. These faculty members would ultimately serve as his advisors, friends, and colleagues during his ten year career at Harvard; coming to America gave Long the opportunity to work with the world’s great minds of the era.⁹ Being the first Vietnamese at Harvard was especially difficult for Long because success in college for a foreign student is often dependent upon a social network of students from the student’s home country of nationality (Wimberley et. al, 1992). As the first Vietnamese, a support group of fellow countrymen at Harvard was non-existent. Long’s social network of support consisted of university faculty and Vietnamese students at other schools; his self-reliance, resilience, and intellectual capacity explains much of his later success at Harvard.

Although Long never mentioned it in our interview, other Vietnamese students living in America at the time, reported having problems living among Americans. One Vietnamese student at San Diego State:

Many of the American students, particularly those who feel deeply about the war look upon us as the enemy...they keep bugging us about how the United States has fought our war for us, and we have done nothing. They tell us that all South Vietnamese are corrupt and, worse, that we are cowards. (Holles, 1971)

⁹ Dr. Ngo granted me access to several of his personal papers. Included were letters of recommendation from Kissinger, Hunting, Zinn, and Chomsky. Reading these letters of recommendation was like reading letters from a who’s who in academia. It was apparent though that all of these men had great respect for Dr. Ngo as a scholar and saw the value in him being a Vietnamese student at Harvard.

THE FIRST VIETNAMESE TO ATTEND HARVARD

During Long's time at Harvard, he travelled with Zinn and Chomsky on the anti-war lecture circuit. Long was the only Vietnamese voice during the anti-war teach-ins and many referred to him jokingly as the "token Vietnamese." He would always speak toward the end of the series of lectures because audiences consistently wanted to hear what a Vietnamese had to say about the war. According to Long, it was a way to keep people seated for the entire teach-in. His participation did not come without cost, as he was ostracized from the Vietnamese community, "A lot of people were very angry at me for telling the truth...a lot of people hated me for opposing the Vietnam War." In 1981, Long's appearance at a panel discussion at Harvard, concluded with an angry observer attempted to murder Long by attempting to hit him with a gasoline bomb. The assailant had evidently served time in Communist Vietnam re-education camps and was angry at Long for supporting peace between Vietnam and the U.S (Times, 1981). When I discussed this event with Dr. Ngo, he said that whenever he talks about peace between the two countries, many accuse him of being a communist. In my interview, Dr. Ngo repeated several times that he is not a communist; however, he wishes for reconciliation between the two countries. Unfortunately, his wish did not become somewhat reality until 1996 under President Clinton when relations between the two countries were normalized.

The exposure and success of conveying his anti-war message as a student of Harvard, would have not been possible had Long remained in Vietnam; students were simply unable to organize effectively across international borders. During the Vietnam Era, international education researcher Phillip Altbach wrote, "the fact remains that the international student movement has been a failure" (Altbach, 1970). Although in 1963, Vietnamese students in both Japan and France had successfully organized a fasting period to protest government persecution of Buddhists in South Vietnam (Times, 1963).

Long was also successful in other endeavours besides his teach-ins. He also published his own newsletter *Thoi-Bao Ga*

which he described as “the longest newsletter of the peace movement, it lasted for six years.” He sent his newsletter to every representative and senator in congress. In 1968, Long along with 24 other Vietnamese students studying in the U.S. and Canada issued a statement to the United States to stop the war:

In this dark hour of history we appeal to all men of good will in the world, particularly in the United States, to join us in denouncing this war and in working for an immediate return of peace to Vietnam (Ngo, 1968).

As a graduate student at Harvard, Long directed the Vietnam Resource Center at Cambridge, MA. In 1972, he led a group of anti-war students to Southern Illinois University to protest its Center for Vietnamese Studies. What ensued was a publicized oral brawl between pro-war Vietnamese students and anti-war Vietnamese students (whom were led by Long). Pro-war Vietnamese shouted “Down with Ngo Vinh Long!” When asked by a reporter about why he led the group to SIU, Long stated, “Many of us came to the United States on State Department scholarships—thinking America was the most idea land on earth. We were wrong and now we are speaking out, at risk of losing our scholarships” (Ayres, 1972).¹⁰

Long went on to graduate with a bachelors from Harvard in 1968, a masters from Harvard in 1970, and a doctoral degree from Harvard in 1978. He founded and oversaw the publication of an academic journal called *Vietnam Quarterly* now known as *Critical Asian Studies*. In addition to numerous journal articles, he also wrote the “Background Narrative” for and served as the main in-house consultant and chief translator to the award-winning PBS series *Vietnam: A Television History*. He is author of the books *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants under the French* (1973) and *Vietnamese Women in Society and Revolution* (1974); both books are considered classics in the field. His new book tentatively

¹⁰ The Ayres article states that there were approximately 300 Vietnamese students in America in 1972. This number coincides with estimates that were given during my interviews with Dr. Ngo and Dr. Tran.

THE FIRST VIETNAMESE TO ATTEND HARVARD

entitled *Vietnam: The Quest for Independence and Freedom, 1945-2002*, will be published by Columbia University Press. He is currently a professor of history at the University of Maine.

In 2000, as part of a 25th anniversary of the end of the war, Long was invited to be a featured speaker at Yale for a lecture series commemorating anti-war activists. One of the event organizers said one of the reasons they invited Long was because “he is profoundly knowledgeable, one of our outstanding scholars in the field of Asian history” (Tuhus, 2000).

Ngo Vinh Long’s story of how he came to Harvard is a story that relays the importance of international education as a form of migration. Had it not been for Harvard, Long would have been most likely been arrested by Vietnamese police in 1964 and not had the opportunity to come to the United States and speak out against the Vietnam War. For Long, the opportunity to come to college in America probably saved his life.

Protesting the war and speaking out against the American involvement created career problems for Dr. Ngo. Although he is a tenured professor at the University of Maine, he would have been much happier had he stayed at Harvard or went on to another major research university. What hurt him in his career was the constant label of “communist,” although he himself has denied the claim. During the Vietnam War years, many Americans believed they were fighting communism and more particularly Soviet Communism. When in actuality, the North Vietnamese saw the war as a battle for independence, which did not exactly coincide with the American notion of Red Soviet Communism. Long had witnessed an incredible amount of violence as a child and wanted to end the war and let Vietnamese decide their own affairs.

Another challenge Dr. Ngo faced was he was a “guest” in the United States while a student at Harvard (although now he is a U.S. citizen). As a guest in the U.S., he also brought risk to himself as young Vietnamese leading protests against

CHRIS NORLUND

the war. Very few foreign students would consider studying in another country and actively protests its government; and hence Long was quite radical in his views. However, the Vietnam War produced 3-4 million Vietnamese deaths. Long sacrificed his career and personal safety in speaking out against the war. As a young Vietnamese-American scholar living in the United States, it is important for this generation to ask questions of the first Vietnamese in America before their oral history is lost forever.

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THE FIRST VIETNAMESE TO ATTEND HARVARD

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