

The Three Rivers - Understanding My Vietnamese Culture

By Helen Le

Growing up, my parents and grandparents would tell stories about their lives back in Vietnam. They spoke about their hardships, from not being able to afford tuition to go to school, to leaving everything they had behind in Vietnam just to find a better life in another country. The images they portrayed of Vietnam were black and white; women in áo dài with their nón lá, men chatting away as they drank beer and smoked cigarettes on step stools, and children playing in the small neighbourhood streets. To me, the image of Vietnam that was portrayed was a time capsule from the 1980s, and stopped from there. Although I appreciated the Vietnamese culture, I found it difficult to relate to; I had never been to Vietnam, and it felt as if Vietnam was nothing but a distant memory.

As I grew older, I realized that the Vietnamese culture had changed a lot since the 1980s. As I met more young people who grew up in Vietnam, I realized that some of them shared a lot of the same interests as me, and it made Vietnam feel closer to home than I had originally thought. Vietnam was no longer just a capsulated memory, but an evolving and modernizing country. When I visited Orange-County, California with my family back in 2019, I had never seen so many Vietnamese youth who did not grow up in their native country yet were so in touch with the Vietnamese language and culture. Even meeting young Vietnamese people back in my community through MVSA (McMaster Vietnamese Student Association) general meetings and talking about my experience growing up Vietnamese-Canadian to Will (my mentor from MVSA) made the Vietnamese culture feel relatable. It seemed that Vietnam was not as distant as it seemed.

The song I produced is a combination of these ideas and thoughts. The melody is from the song *Hội Trùng Dương*, a song my grandpa used to play to me as a child before I went to sleep. In a way, it represents the perspective of the Vietnamese culture through my parents' and grandparents' eyes, as it is an old song reminiscent of their time in Vietnam. But the song itself has greater significance; it describes the three rivers from their own respective regions that flow through Vietnam and converging at the Pacific Ocean. To me, the song symbolizes the reach of the Vietnamese culture beyond Vietnam, impacting the many Vietnamese people around the world. The melody itself is situated in a modern musical context; the instrumental has a drum pattern and instrumentation that gives the song an R&B feel. The musical setting represents my understanding of the Vietnamese culture in the present-time, and the incorporation of it into my life.

I believe that it's important to bridge the understanding of the Vietnamese culture with the youth that grew up in Canada. Although the stories our parents tell us make us understand the hardships our parents went through and the culture of Vietnam during their time, it can

sometimes make Vietnam feel distant and difficult to understand. Bringing the Vietnamese culture together through the youth in our community can make the Vietnamese culture more accessible, and help us better understand and relate to our own culture. Vietnam is closer to home than we think.