The Pool at the Sak Woi Club

Nhi (Nancy) Chung

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1. Saigon, 1967

The wind in a room. Often, though the club would be a hive of activity, with waiters, sunners, diners by the food counter, and children bounding through the wading area, the main indoor pool would be empty. A current of air would undulate along its placid surface, raising a single wavelet that glittered outstandingly like one flounce on a plain dress.

Ringing one side of the pool would be the French women in string bikinis with their shapely legs and (to me) awesome breasts, their bodies creamy with suntan lotion. These Europeans seldom went in the water, so the club was filled with swimsuit-garbed people who never swam. This made the pool like a bay that was empty but surrounded by ships in drydock.

When I was 15 years old, I learned to swim there. I felt gangly and ungainly as I walked along past the row of reclining, full-bodied white women. As a rule, the Sak Woi Club (Club Rocher) was closed to Chinese, but because my father was a manager for the Taiwanese of a large (2,000 worker-strong) textile factory, our family was allowed to be members. Baba wouldn't pay for swimming lessons, so I would sit by the poolside and observe.

The French women always swam…curvaceously. Though their eyes and facial structure were concealed by goggles and cap, as they rose from the water, when doing the frog stroke, the delicate strings of their slim necks and shoulders were visible. I loved to see their sturdy flanks and muscular arms draped in water so transparent that they seemed to be swimming in a glass of white wine.

2. Thu-Duc, 1976

The Chinese in the city had a saying, "Man doe gung chan dong mai jow you jow fai de." ("When we smell the Communist wind, we have to run very fast.") The saying indicated the dread we felt when we knew they were going to take over the country. The Vietnamese had no great love for the Chinese, and we knew we would bear a large brunt of the burden in supporting the country's reconstruction. What exactly this would cost us was unclear. We Saigonese Chinese waited like sheep who knew we would be sheared but not whether we would be slaughtered soon afterward.

Now, if there was one thing the Communists were expert at, even better than at contorting dialectics, it was at squeezing money.

Once the Communists came to power, the most deep-thinking Chinese, like my uncle, preempted intervention by immediately "donating" their goods and factories to the conquerors. Such people were given special consideration by the authorities. In the case of my uncle, well, he was an old man anyway.

Those who resisted such donations had their enterprises seized while they ended up imprisoned or dead. But what about those, like my father, who could not give up as much as they were expected to yield? Father quickly, if

grumblingly, turned over all of his property; but he would give little more because he didn't have all the wealth, in gold or jewelry, they thought he had.

During the boom, he was always expanding our noodle factory, adding sheds, workers' housing and driveway. He kept returning his profits to the business. True, he was an old man now, too, but the Communists didn't trust him and they were desperate. Like a handful of dusty, bruised grapes, he must go in the press.

The government had three ways to get our money.

They changed the currency first. All old-style dollars had to be turned in. When you surrendered your money, you were registered and got $50 (Vietnamese). If you turned in $10, you got $50. If you turned in $1,000, you got the same $50. You could only buy food with allotment coupons, and unless you were registered, you couldn't get those coupons. What good was the old money anyway? It was worthless on the world market.

Second, the government sent people to live in your house. These were high school students. They watched what you ate every day. As I stated, you received coupons for a certain amount of oil, vegetables and rice for each month. The students watched to see if you were eating more than your allotment. They kept asking you where you hid your jewelry and money.

They don't have any school at that time. They sent those little kids to live with you for months.

They search your house for money and follow you to see where you go.

Third, if they are convinced you have wealth, as they were in my aunt's case, since she owned a jewelry store, they capture you. They say to you, "I want you to come here. We have a few questions to ask you." Then they keep you in a hotel for months. They wake you up anytime and demand that you tell them where your gold is. Almost every person who has a business gets this treatment. My aunt was in prison for many months.

Here is our situation.

Father had one Vietnamese clerk, Hue. All the others were Chinese. She was not as good as the others, but we needed someone who could write Vietnamese. She kept asking for a promotion, but never got one. Once the government seized the factory, she became the union representative. If you do that, you get a good job in the factory.

Father said this woman had betrayed us.

The factory was full of North Vietnamese soldiers. They were afraid we would steal something to sell.

Every morning all the employees had to sit in a circle. Father had to sit in the middle and Hue accused him of things.

I heard about a secret boat leaving the country and I asked my parents what to do.

My mother said, "How can a young lady survive? You will be cheated by people in America. We are diligent people. Let us all die together."

Father said, "I believe we can work hard to survive."

The rations were sparse. For six people for one month, three kilos rice. And it wasn't good rice, but sa gook my. Rice with sand inside and husks. We had to put the rice on white paper and pick out the dross. We cooked it mixed with guy may, that is, yams.

We were starving and mother went crying to uncle, who used to own a jewelry store. He began selling (his hidden) gold on the black market to get us food. This shamed father.

They put him at the center of the circle. "You oppressed your workers," Hue said. "You hid your gold. You must give it back to the people. Where is your gold?"

During the week, we slept at the factory in Thu-Doc. I rose at 4 a.m., washed, then would wake father.

One cold morning, near the time of French Christmas, I remember a sluice of cold wind that stove through the wooden wall slats. I woke timidly, still flattened out like a tire tread by lack of sleep, vigor and food. I was so hungry, like a slave to hunger. Sometimes I would steal and wolf down raw noodles when the soldiers weren't looking.

That morning I brushed the water along my face. I felt it hitting me like a series of slaps.

The hallway was filled with cats, prowling and meowing. Many hung around the factory and encampment, waiting for droppings of food and hunting down our abundant mice. I bent to chuck my favorite under the chin.

Father's door was hard to open. When I got it open, I saw him in bed, staring at the ceiling, as if entranced by the dirty tar paper. His mouth was open like a flap or like a pouch ready to receive a coin: his skin no longer orangeish but white. Perhaps milk had been spilled all over him. His hand was curved like a chicken foot.

I tried to shut the door, crying, pushing back all those filthy animals. For if a cat crosses a dead man's body, the corpse will rise.

3. Saigon, 1976

I stood looking at a pool that seemed to be filled with Kool- Aid. Crowded, sudsy, and lime-colored, the water teemed with the sandy, ruddy, smoky bodies of Vietnamese. Many of the swimmers were veterans: scarred, disfigured, de-limbed, so their swimming was erratic, jarring, off-course, cranky. There were no discernible lanes such as the Europeans had established, no pathways through which swimmers could move along in orderly queues. Everyone was swimming, paddling, and flopping this way and that, acting as would a mad rush of waterbugs when a stone falls in the pond.

Looking closer, I saw the water appeared greasy, as if it were made up of sheets of wax paper spread in diaphanous layers.

There was no chlorine, no chlorine smell, but an odor of sweat, urine and burnt rubber.

I dove in.

I think I was the only Chinese in the club. It was the same Sak Woi Club that had been seized by the government and now opened to party members and factory operatives. Since our factory had been taken over, I had been running a machine and this entitled me to use the pool.

The French had kept a woman at the brink of the door leading from the showers to the swimming area. She looked as stern as the cow that stands at the Gate of Hell. The lady reproved and turned back anyone who had not showered. Now that woman was gone and people walked in off the street, trunks under clothes, stripped at waterside and jumped in. Since not many people had running water at home in those days, I think, some used the pool for bathing not for recreation.

I broke the surface angry. Some flailing swimmer had lashed me along the leg, making my flesh sting as if it had been cut by a sapling. I had a gagging taste in my mouth.

I jogged my eyes open, swam one length, then removed myself from the messy pool

Admittedly, there was equality. It was not the French and the Americans taking everything. Now, no one had anything.

I moved forward, shouldering aside a tracery of wind that swept my dirty, drizzling locks.

Nhi (Nancy) Chung was one of the boat people who left Vietnam in 1978. She lost her mother, brother and sister in escaping the country. After six months on a ship and a month in a Manila refugee camp, she came to the U.S. She became a New York City public school bilingual teacher, instructing students in Vietnamese, Cantonese and Mandarin. She now teaches at a city elementary school.

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Vietnam: Where the Political is Still Personal, FE #385, Fall, 2011.

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