



Family Tightrope

The Changing
Lives of
Vietnamese
Americans



Nazli Kibria

CHAPTER ONE

Assimilation, Adaptation, and Immigrant Life

BINH¹ WAS BORN in 1933 in North Vietnam, in the province of Binh Thuan in a village that was heavily Catholic. Of his eleven brothers and sisters, only two were alive today, the rest having died from either illness or effects of war. Binh's father had told him that their family had lived in the village for at least three generations, and until his grandparents' generation, they had been village notables (*lỵ trưởn*g). When Binh was ten years old, his father had gone south to work on a rubber plantation owned by the French. His father had inherited a hectare and a half of land, in which he sold one hectare to pay for his passage to the south as well as that of his wife and two of their youngest children. Binh did not accompany his parents but remained in the village under the care of his maternal grandmother and attended school for about eight years.

In 1953 Binh joined the French armed forces, who were engaged in battle against nationalist Vietnamese forces for control of Vietnam. In 1954, following the Geneva Treaty and the subsequent partition of the country, Binh and other family members moved to the south, fleeing religious and economic persecution from the Northern regime. Binh remained in the armed forces. A couple of years after the move to the south, he got married: "My father sent me a telegram saying my mother and so I went there for the funeral. I found out that it was a lie and I wanted me to marry. That time I didn't have any success, so I didn't want to get married. I was twenty-three or twenty-four at the time. But my father told me, 'You are mature now, you should marry, otherwise you will hang around and do bad things.' So I got married; someone married me with my wife, Van."

Binh began his career in the army in the south in the rank of first corporal (*hạ sĩ*). In 1973, his last year of military service, he was a war officer (*thiếu tá*). During his years in the military, Binh moved steadily, although most of his transfers were within Central Vietnam in order to supplement his income, his wife, Van, engaged in small-

¹ All names have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of informants.

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trading activities, and she eventually opened a small variety store. By 1972, with the help of his wife, Binh had managed to accumulate enough money to buy two buses. He described life in the south in the 1960s and 1970s to be economically “comfortable and easy.” Although they did not have a car or many luxury items, he and his family (which included his six children) never had to worry about money at that time.

But things changed in 1975. The government collectivized his buses, and it became more and more difficult to make ends meet. Binh worried about the economic future of his sons and about the possibility that they would be drafted into the army to fight against Cambodia. These considerations, as well as others, played into his decision to leave Vietnam: “I came here [the United States] for freedom. In Vietnam I had enough to live, but I wasn’t free. For instance, I had money in the bank but if I wanted to spend it I had to send them an application letter telling them why I wanted to withdraw it, and they could still forbid it. They didn’t forbid religion, but if the priest wanted to do the worship he had to do it only at certain times and places. That’s why I left, for freedom and for my children to have education. The best thing about life in America is that we’re free to do what we want, but the worst thing is that the culture and customs make people rotten.”

In 1981, Binh left Vietnam with three of his sons. His wife did not want to leave, and it was also necessary that someone remain behind to look after their aged parents. Binh planned to send money back for the remainder of his family to escape after he had been in the United States for about a year. The boat journey out of Vietnam to Thailand took three days, during which time they were robbed twice by Thai pirates. After about six months, Binh and his sons arrived in Philadelphia, sponsored by a social service agency.

For about ten months after arriving in the United States, Binh drew on the financial support available to newly arrived refugees. After this he began a part-time janitorial position that paid minimum wage. But then a back injury that he incurred in a serious car accident prevented him from working for several months. All three of Binh’s sons were in school, and one was soon to enter college. The family managed to live on the cash public assistance they received as well as on the income from the sons’ after-school jobs. Binh tried to find another job, but he felt tired and frustrated. He spent his time talking with friends in the neighborhood as well as doing the laundry and cooking for the household. He had never prepared food in his life before. When his sons complained about his cooking, he told them that they would have to make do with whatever

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food he prepared until they married and there were women around to do the cooking.

Binh had felt sad and dispirited since arriving in the United States. It had proven to be much more difficult to bring his wife and remaining children over to the United States than he had anticipated. He did not want to “die alone” in the United States, and he felt that he would like to return to Vietnam some day. What troubled him most about life here was the change in his sons. They no longer respected him or listened to him. They had quickly become Americanized. Sometimes he tried to discipline them, but this was difficult because U.S. society was “on their side.”

Lien was born in Saigon in 1966, the second-youngest in a family of twelve brothers and sisters. She described her family:

We lived in a big house, and my paternal grandfather and grandmother lived next door to us. All around us, near us, we had relatives. . . . aunts, uncles. Not my maternal grandparents, though, because they lived in the countryside and they also died when I was very young.

When I was small, my father was in the army and my mother had a small store (*tiệm tạp hóa*). I think we were rich in Vietnam at that time, because we lived in a nice house and we had a housekeeper. I never did any work; I was so spoiled, when someone asked me to do something, I cried and then I didn’t have to do it. I think it’s because my grandmother lived next door. I spent most of my time with my grandmother. And she used to say, “you’re so spoiled, no one will want to marry you.” I said I didn’t care about that. I was always very independent.

In 1975 life changed for Lien and her family. Her father and a brother were sent to one of the reeducation camps that had been set up by the new government for the members of the old regime. Her mother’s business also suffered because of the new government’s policies toward private businesses. Eventually her mother closed her store because the high taxes no longer made it a profitable venture. In order to make ends meet, Lien’s mother and sisters began to sew clothes and sell them at the market.

In 1977, one of Lien’s elder brothers escaped from Vietnam by boat and eventually resettled in the United States. Lien was in school at this time. But she felt increasingly restless and depressed, in part because the return of her father from the reeducation camp had been followed by a period of great tension and unhappiness between her mother and father. After hearing of her brother’s successful escape, she began thinking about following him. At first, Lien’s parents refused the request. But they

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eventually gave in, persuaded by the idea that life in the United States would be much better for her, a child of the former regime, than it could ever be in Vietnam. Also, her parents planned to try to follow her later—although this plan never materialized, partly because of the serious illness that Lien's mother developed shortly after Lien's departure from Vietnam.

Lien left the country under the guardianship of an aunt who was a close friend of her mother. After five nights at sea, they arrived in Hong Kong, where they were to spend the next eight months. Lien, her aunt, and her aunt's three children eventually resettled in Hawaii. Lien described Hawaii as a beautiful place, one to which she often dreamed of returning someday. About two months after arriving in Hawaii, Lien's aunt remarried, to a Chinese-American man she had met there. At this time, Lien decided to leave Hawaii, both because she felt uncomfortable with her aunt's new husband and, more important, because her older brother, who had resettled in Philadelphia, had sent her a letter asking her to join him there.

After arriving in Philadelphia, Lien moved into her brother's one-room apartment. He worked as a cook in a restaurant while she went to school. The next year was a painful one for Lien as her brother began to beat her up every day when she returned home from school. After about a year of putting up with her brother's physical abuse, Lien made the decision to leave her brother and live with some friends. She was encouraged to do so by an Asian American teacher at her school with whom she had become close friends. Her friends' parents treated her like a daughter and adopted her into the family. Lien felt happy under their care, and she was also proud of the excellent grades that she was receiving at school. But a few months later, Lien dropped out of school to marry a Vietnamese American she had met at school. She and her new husband then moved into an apartment that they shared with three of her husband's brothers.

Binh and Lien are two of the Vietnamese refugees I became acquainted with from 1983 to 1985, when I conducted research among recently arrived Vietnamese refugees in an inner-city area of Philadelphia. Through in-depth interviews and participant observation in household and community settings, I sought to understand how these newcomers were experiencing their initial years of life in the United States. The two life histories that I have summarized here hint at the myriad and often dramatic quality of the life changes that have accompanied Vietnamese migration and set-

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tlement in the United States. This book explores one dimension of these changes: shifts in family life.

In recent years, many popular media reports have described Vietnamese Americans as among the latest representatives of the quintessentially American immigrant success story. News stories describe how, in a short period of time, the group has managed to overcome poverty by dint of hard work and effort. As *Time Magazine* put it, after describing the economic accomplishments of a Vietnamese immigrant fisherman in Texas, "A decade after their arrival in America, the onetime refugees are becoming solid members of the Sunbelt's middle class."²

Popular media reports further suggest that what is responsible for the alleged miraculous economic progress of Vietnamese Americans is the cultural quality of their family life. That is, like other Asian Americans, within the stable, traditional, and hierarchical confines of their families, the Vietnamese are taught the cultural values that are integral to their success. Thus Ellen Hume, in a newspaper article describing the group, comments: "What explains their success? The values they come with—a dedication to family, education and thrift—are cited as the main reason by people who have observed the refugees."³ (1985). The invoking of family life as an explanation for immigrant economic progress has also been fostered by the statements of neoconservatives and New Right spokespersons, who in recent years have used "the family" . . . in explaining away the differential success or failure of ethnic minority groups, including Asian Americans" (Hamamoto 1992, 35).

But to what extent does this image of stability, cultural continuity, and internal consensus reflect the reality of Vietnamese American family life? Contrary to the media images that I have described, the families that I studied were not the unchanging and uncompromisingly traditional and Confucian entities that they are often made out to be. Rather, I found family life to be an arena of considerable conflict and flux. I saw and heard women, men, and children struggling to reconstruct and redefine the structure and meaning of family life. This book unravels and describes that reconstruction process.

The notion that migration has left Vietnamese American family life

² From an article titled "Finding Niches in a New Land," in the Special Immigrants Issue of *Time Magazine* (July 8, 1985): 24–101. For another report see "Asian-Americans: A Model Minority," *Newsweek* (December 6, 1982) 40–51.

³ From: "Vietnam's Legacy: Indochinese Refugees Prosper in U.S., Drawing on Survival Skills, Special Values," *Wall Street Journal* (March 21, 1985).

unscathed is belied by the tremendous disruption wrought on the family groups and networks of Vietnamese refugees by the move to the United States. Although separation from kin is perhaps a universal aspect of the immigrant experience, the circumstances that have surrounded the Vietnamese migration have made the extent and depth of these separations extremely sharp for the group. For example, it is far from uncommon to find young Vietnamese children in the United States without their parents, or Vietnamese husbands without their wives. Responding to these losses, Vietnamese Americans worked hard to rebuild family ties in the United States. They did this by shifting and expanding the criteria for inclusion in the family circle. Thus, for example, friends and distant relatives who had been marginal members of the family circle in Vietnam became part of the active circle of kin relations in the United States. In short, migration to the United States had, in significant ways, altered the substance of family ties for the group.

In addition to altering family boundaries, migration to the United States had also challenged the traditional gender and generational hierarchies of Vietnamese family life. Crucial to understanding these challenges are the social and economic losses that Vietnamese refugee men had suffered in the transition to life in the United States. In pre-1975 South Vietnam, my male informants had been members of the middle class. But once in the United States, they found themselves in an environment in which their occupational opportunities were limited, and they were often treated with disdain as "foreigners" and subordinates in the racial hierarchy of U.S. society. Because of the men's losses, the status of Vietnamese immigrant men and women (in terms of relative control of social and economic resources) had approached a situation of greater equality than in the past. This decline in men's economic and social resources was also responsible for the greater generational equality in families and, concomitantly, a rise in blatant and visible conflicts between the generations in family contexts.

The rise in women's access to resources, relative to that of men, was a source of tension and change in the relations of men and women in Vietnamese American families. But contrary to what one might expect, Vietnamese American women did not simply react to this situation of greater equality by attempting to restructure family life along more egalitarian lines. Rather, I found women to be deeply ambivalent about changes in family life, particularly those that would signify crucial departures from the traditional family system. I found women struggling to reconcile and incorporate their new resources into the framework of Vietnamese kin-

ship traditions. They walked an ideological tightrope, struggling to use their new resources to their advantage but not in ways that significantly altered or threatened the traditional family system. Vietnamese American women valued the traditional Vietnamese family system for its ethic of collectivism and cooperation, in contrast to what they described as the "selfishness" of U.S. families and culture. They also spoke with approval of the ties of obligation that bound Vietnamese men and children to their families, as well as the tremendous authority assigned to parents in the traditional Vietnamese family system. These were both aspects of Vietnamese family traditions that women felt were vital and valuable, and sorely missing from U.S. family life.

Of course, my informants' attitudes and feelings about Vietnamese family traditions were far from uniform and in fact varied a great deal, particularly according to age and family circumstances. Younger informants' (in their early twenties or younger) feelings about the traditional Vietnamese family system were certainly more conflicted than that of their elders. Nonetheless, few younger informants were willing or eager simply to discard Vietnamese family traditions. I found that for the young, Vietnamese family traditions entered into their efforts to come to terms with their cultural identity, to understand and define what it meant "to be Vietnamese" in the United States. Vietnamese American young explicitly identified what they saw to be the distinctive features of Vietnamese family life as essential to what set them apart in U.S. society, what "made them Vietnamese." Their efforts to redefine family life were informed by concern and anxiety about how to carve out a cultural place for themselves in the United States, a place that would give meaning to their racial-ethnic⁴ status. More generally, for Vietnamese Americans, both young and old, the traditional Vietnamese family system, particularly its cooperative and collectivist elements and manifestations, was a source of cultural pride and self-esteem.

The value that Vietnamese Americans placed on the traditional Vietnamese family system also arose from the fact of its close relationship to the economic practices of Vietnamese Americans, or the ways in which they survived and reached for the attainment of middle-class status in the United States. Much as they had done prior to migration, Vietnamese immigrants relied on a collectivist household economy, one in which indi-

⁴ I use the term *racial-ethnic* to convey what Amott and Marthaei (1991) have described as "the contradictory nature of racial theories and practices, in particular the fact that those people seen as belonging to a particular 'race' often lack a shared set of distinctive physical characteristics, but rather share a common ethnicity or culture" (p. 17).

vidual resources were shared and pooled to cope with the demands and vicissitudes of the economic environment faced in the United States. These collectivist household economies were organized around Vietnamese kinship traditions, drawing on them for structure, support, and legitimation. Thus Vietnamese Americans strove to preserve the traditional Vietnamese family system partly because of its significance to their economic lives and future.

The picture of Vietnamese American family life that I paint in this book is, of course, one that is bounded by time. Perhaps the best way to see it is as a snapshot of the Vietnamese American experience. Indeed, my data constantly reminded me of the dynamic quality of Vietnamese American family patterns, and the ongoing nature of change. There are, however, reasons to believe that the initial years following resettlement do hold some special insights for those who are concerned with the immigrant experience. It is when immigrants first arrive in the new country that the social and cultural challenges posed by migration may be experienced in an exceptionally sharp fashion because of the novelty of the new society and the pressures associated with beginning a new life. It is at this time that immigrants may begin to feel most poignantly, the tremendous and far-reaching consequences of having made the migration journey. Immigrants' reflections about how their social worlds have changed as a result of migration are likely to have an immediacy and sharpness in the early years of settlement. It is precisely the "newness" of the immigrant and the sense of disjuncture that he or she experiences that make a study of the initial years valuable in its ability to provide a clear picture of how migration challenges prior realities and how immigrants understand and respond to the new realities of their lives.

VIETNAMESE IN THE UNITED STATES

The flow of Vietnamese refugees into the United States began in April 1975, with the fall of the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government and the reunification of the country under the Communist leadership of North Vietnam. At this time, about 130,000 Vietnamese were flown into the United States, as part of an evacuation effort to aid the employees and associates of the United States government who were in Vietnam. However, in a largely unanticipated trend, the outflow of people from Vietnam was to continue after the 1975 evacuation. From 1975 to 1985, nearly half a million Vietnamese settled in the United States, making them one of

the largest Asian-origin populations in the country.⁵ Given current growth rates, in the future the Vietnamese are expected to be a significant presence, particularly in California and Texas.⁶

Despite the increasingly sizable presence of the Vietnamese population in the United States, studies of the group are as yet of limited scope. For the most part, existing works are concerned with either the economic situation or the mental health of the group. Available research also usually fails to differentiate among the various Southeast Asian nationalities and groups (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, Hmong, ethnic Chinese), treating them instead as a single category of analysis.⁷ Yet the social, cultural, and historical gulfs between these groups are vast. For example, Southeast Asians speak different languages and their degree of urbanization and exposure to Western culture prior to arrival in the United States has been varied. There is a dearth of research that considers the specific experiences of the groups in terms of their particularities and also goes beyond the exploration of employment patterns to more detailed, contextual accounts of their experiences in a variety of life spheres.

Within the larger history of immigration to the United States, Vietnamese Americans are aptly seen as part of what has been described as "the new immigration" following the Immigration Act of 1965 (Gold 1992, 7). This act set in motion a flow of immigration into the United States that has been, in many ways, distinct from previous flows. Whereas prior to 1965, most immigrants were white and of European extraction, since 1965 they have been mostly nonwhite and from Third World countries. Furthermore, reflecting the greater diversity of their social and economic backgrounds in comparison to previous waves of immigrants, post-1965

⁵ The 1990 census reported 614,547 Vietnamese in the United States, a number that was about 100,000 persons short of actual admissions from Vietnam from 1975 to 1990. A possible explanation for this discrepancy is the self-reported identification in the 1990 census of many Vietnamese as "Chinese" due to the significant presence of Chinese-Vietnamese persons among Vietnamese refugees to the United States (Rumbaut, personal communication).

⁶ The 1990 census showed California to be home to 45.6 percent of the Vietnamese population in the United States, with Texas following at 11.3 percent. For information on fertility rates among Southeast Asian refugees see Rumbaut and Weeks (1986).

⁷ The treatment by researchers of Southeast Asians as a group reflects the similar treatment and legal status accorded to them by the U.S. government. Related to this is the fact that one of the major sources of statistical information on Southeast Asian refugees in the United States are the annual reports to Congress prepared by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. In these reports, which are often used by social scientists in their analyses, information is presented on Southeast Asians as a group.

immigrants have entered into an extremely varied range of occupations and sectors of the United States economy (Massey 1981; Portes and Rumbaut 1990, 7).

Besides their economic status, another source of diversity among contemporary immigrants is government classification of their legal status. Of those who legally enter, some are treated as "immigrants," and others, such as Vietnamese Americans, as "political refugees." Those who are classified as refugees have been judged by the United States government to have left their homelands due to political, religious, or other forms of persecution, in contrast to immigrants who have *chosen* to emigrate. As Steve Gold (1992, ix-x) observes, the refugee/immigrant distinction, although by no means a completely invalid one, has been somewhat overplayed in the refugee literature, which has often treated the two groups of people as completely distinct in their experience. In reality, the motivations for migration often involve a complex mixture of political, economic, and other factors, and the official labels imposed are "not a matter of personal choice" (Portes and Rumbaut 1990, 23). In other words, it is quite possible for an immigrant to be driven by persecution to leave his or her homeland and yet be classified by the United States government as an "immigrant" rather than a "refugee." Given these complexities, I suggest that it is useful to consider refugees as a type of immigrant rather than as a group that is completely divorced from the concerns and experiences of the larger immigrant population. It is certainly true that the experience of the refugee often differs from that of the immigrant, particularly in terms of the conditions of departure from the homeland, which are often far more constrained. At the same time, there is considerable overlap in experience between the two groups.

But clearly, refugees and immigrants do differ in the type of reception that is accorded them by the United States government. For example, unlike immigrants, those who are classified as refugees are eligible for government assistance. Stimulated in part by the growing Southeast Asian entry into the country in the late 1970s, the United States government has created an elaborate "structure of refuge" to deal with refugees (Rumbaut 1989a).⁸ This structure of refuge, involving a complex configuration of policies guiding entry and settlement, has included special government-funded programs designed to aid adjustment. Thus refugees have access to the welfare system (Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Supple-

⁸ The Refugee Act of 1980, stimulated in part by the increased flow of Southeast Asian refugees, formalized and supplemented the ad hoc, nationality-specific refugee resettlement system that existed prior to this time.

mental Security Income, Medicaid, food stamps) on the same means-tested basis as citizens. For a period of time following arrival,⁹ there are also special Federal programs (Refugee Cash Assistance and Refugee Medical Assistance) for those refugees who are income-eligible but do not meet the other criteria of AFDC and Medicaid. The vast majority of immigrants in the United States, both in the past and today, have not had access to such government aid programs. Thus because the Vietnamese have entered the United States as political refugees, government policies and programs have played a fairly important part in shaping their initial years of resettlement. The effects of the structure of refuge on Vietnamese American life are among the questions to be explored in this book.

The eligibility of refugees for government assistance has perhaps contributed to the rather lukewarm reception that U.S. society has accorded Vietnamese refugees. In a series of Gallup polls conducted in 1979, more than 60 percent of those surveyed indicated that they opposed the admission of Vietnamese refugees into the country (Stern 1981). Besides the fact that they have served as a somewhat painful reminder of the long and fateful U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam war, the resettlement of Southeast Asians has occurred at a time of widespread hostility toward racial-ethnic groups. Vietnamese Americans entering the country during the late 1970s and early to mid-1980s faced a social and political climate of conservatism and "backlash" to the political gains of minorities forged in the previous decade. In an analysis of these trends, Orni and Winant suggest (1986, 109-13) that the major economic dislocations of the 1970s and 1980s made much of U.S. society increasingly resistant to and resentful of providing economic benefits to the "underprivileged." These public sentiments were reflected in the election of Ronald Reagan and in the widespread support and partial success of his efforts to dismantle Federal programs for the poor—efforts that particularly affected minorities (Palmer and Sawhill 1984). The economic recession of the early 1980s and the Federal cutbacks in programs for the poor intensified the poverty caused by the long-term economic stagnation plaguing many urban areas since the 1960s (Wilson 1987, 39-41). In many instances, Vietnamese-Americans found themselves perceived as new and unwellcome competitors for scarce jobs and public resources. It was in the con-

⁹ In accordance with the 1980 Refugee Act, states received Federal reimbursement for assistance to refugees through RCA and RMA programs, for a period of thirty-six months following their arrival in the United States. In 1982, the period of reimbursement was changed to eighteen months, and in 1988 it was further reduced to twelve months (Office of Refugee Resettlement 1989, 36).

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text of these considerable economic pressures that tensions between racial-ethnic groups, often involving Vietnamese refugees, began erupting in urban areas throughout the country in the early to mid-1980s.¹⁰

Resentment toward Vietnamese refugees was perhaps further fueled by the tendency of the popular media to portray the group as a "model minority." In reality, the economic "progress" of Vietnamese Americans has been extremely uneven. Available evidence does show that by the mid-1980s, those Vietnamese immigrants who had arrived as part of the 1975 evacuation had achieved parity in their household income levels with the general U.S. population (Office of Refugee Resettlement 1988, 147). But succeeding waves of Vietnamese refugees, who have been from less privileged backgrounds than the 1975 cohort, have had less economic success (see Gold 1992, 64). A 1984 survey of Vietnamese refugees in San Diego found 22.4 percent of respondents to be unemployed and 61.3 percent to have incomes below the poverty level. Of those who were employed, 29.2 percent indicated that they received no fringe benefits at work, and 48.7 percent said that there was no possibility for promotion at their jobs (Rumbaut 1989b, 152).

FROM ASSIMILATION TO ADAPTATION: PERSPECTIVES ON IMMIGRANT LIFE

Reflections on the immigrant experience almost invariably touch on family life, an arena in which central and contradictory elements of the immigrant experience converge in powerful ways. The immigrant experience is often one in which old loyalties and relations are simultaneously strengthened and challenged in the face of new social forces. These conflicting processes of change and continuity are powerfully reflected in immigrants' familial experiences. Traditional family arrangements may be threatened by migration but also reinforced as immigrants turn to their families for help and support in their efforts to build a new life.

The scholarly literature on immigrant life in the United States has often treated these synchronous and intertwined processes of transformation and persistence as separable and distinct rather than as integrated aspects of the immigrant experience. Thus some scholars have focused on the

¹⁰ For example, see "Slaying of Boy Sumis Refugee Family," *New York Times* (January 2, 1984); and "Severe Beating of Asian Shakes a School," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (November 6, 1983). Also see Takaki (1989, 480-86).

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disruptions that settlement in the United States brings to the immigrant's traditional way of life, whereas others have been concerned with how immigrant institutions help the immigrant to cope with and adapt to U.S. life. Although both these perspectives hold an important place in the social science literature,¹¹ the past two decades have witnessed a growing focus on the latter concern. In short, there has been gravitation from a concern with how immigrant institutions change to an interest in how these institutions help immigrants to adapt to the "host" society.

The Assimilation Vision

The assimilation perspective¹² has been a dominant paradigm in U.S. scholarship on immigrant life (Gordon 1964; Park and Burgess 1969). Born out of the influential Chicago School of Sociology in the 1930s, under the leadership of Robert Park, assimilation theory suggested that immigrant groups were inevitably to move from attachment to "traditional" immigrant identities and culture toward integration into the "modern" mainstream of U.S. life. In other words, immigrant groups gradually became "Americanized," shedding their loyalties and connections with the immigrant culture and becoming assimilated into the melting pot of the United States. Assimilation theorists did not deny that in the early years, immigrant institutions and loyalties could prove useful to immigrants (Lal 1985). But the theoretical assumptions of these scholars led them to view the survival of and dependence on immigrant institutions as very much a temporary phase, because of the powerful and inevitable quality of assimilation. There were differences of opinion about the exact outcome of assimilation. It could result in "Anglo-conformity," or the complete melding of the immigrant into the majority culture of the United States. Alternatively, in the process of assimilating, immigrants could preserve elements of their own culture within that of the dominant culture. But whether the outcome was "Anglo-conformity" or "cultural pluralism," there was agreement about the centrality of assimilation processes to the immigrant experience.

¹¹ The concern with assimilation remains important in the empirical literature, which examines the degree of assimilation of various groups and the causal factors that drive the assimilation process (Hirschman 1983; Lieberman 1978; Massey 1981).

¹² My definition of the assimilationist model or what Omi and Winant (1986) call "ethnicity-based theory" includes its subvariations, including "cultural pluralism" and "Anglo-conformity."

So far as immigrant family life is concerned, the assimilationist model suggested a gradual movement toward a more "modern" family structure. In making this claim, the model was supported by modernization theorists who argued that industrialization resulted in decisive and inevitable changes in family life. In one of the most influential statements of this perspective, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (1963), William Goode argued that industrialization set in motion processes that replaced extended and structurally complex family systems with the "conjugal family," nuclear and more egalitarian in its internal relations.¹³ Scholars of immigrant life extended Goode's analysis to understand the evolution of family life among immigrant groups. Thus in studies of turn-of-the-century European immigrants in the United States, social scientists wrote of how the traditional, patriarchal, extended family evaporated as immigrants were torn from their peasant world and thrust into the industrial city. Because migration was such a disruptive experience, in the years following settlement there was much disorganization and pathology in the family—as expressed, for example, in high rates of marital separation and child delinquency (Handlin 1951; Warner and Srole 1945). Eventually, however, immigrant family patterns would become more stable as they became more "Americanized," or as assimilation into "modern" family patterns began to take place.

Among the modernizing transformations that were expected of immigrant families, perhaps the most fundamental was a movement toward greater generational and gender equality in families. Previously disenfranchised groups in the family—women and children—gained economic freedom due to the opportunities for wage employment in the industrialized society of the United States. Also relevant to the breakdown of the patriarchal family order was the more egalitarian quality of U.S. cultural values and patterns in contrast to immigrant ones. Thus, although they sometimes portrayed immigrant women as resisting change, those working in the assimilation tradition argued that "Americanization" brought greater equality in the relations of men and women (see Deutsch 1987, 719–20). In other words, because the immigrant culture was "traditional" and hierarchical, as immigrant groups assimilated into U.S. culture, women and children experienced growing freedom from the shackles of tradition and patriarchal authority.

¹³ Other characteristics of Goode's "conjugal family" were autonomous mate selection, an absence of bride price, and a bilateral mode of determining kinship (1963).

Ethnicity and Households as Vehicles of Adaptation

In the popular U.S. imagination, the assimilation vision remains the dominant paradigm for understanding the dynamics and progress of immigrant life. Its power and strength have stemmed not only from its explanatory powers but also from its ideological appeal. The vision of the United States as an open society, a melting pot into which immigrant groups enter and then successfully integrate, has proven to be remarkably powerful and sustained.

However, in recent decades, social scientists have subjected the assimilationist model to a series of sharp and wide-ranging attacks (see Hirschman 1983; Morawska 1985). Omi and Winant (1986) point out that the model assumes that race is not a central or persistent feature of modern societies, and thus neglects the part played by racial dynamics in assimilation processes. Other criticisms are that the dichotomous and unitary concepts of "traditional" and "modern" are deeply problematic ways of understanding societies and social change. At the very least, it is too unrealistic and simple to assume a continuous and progressive unilinear movement from traditional values and behaviors to modern ones. Instead, scholars have argued that modernization processes are uneven; traditional values and social forms may co-exist in relative harmony with more modern ones:

Attacked by multiple theoretical and empirical critiques, dichotomous, linear-polar conceptions of tradition and modernity have been discarded. The *becoming* of urban industrial society is now interpreted as an uneven and multifaceted development in which, dependent on particular historical circumstances, old and new elements and aggregations, often ill fitting and inconsistent, come to exist in varying blends and combinations. (Morawska 1985, 7)

Both reflecting and reinforcing the demise of the modernization perspective, the field of family studies has also become less inclined to interpret changes in family life as a movement from "traditional" to "modern." Increasingly, Goode's "logic of industrialization" and its proposed relationship to the family has been questioned, as studies show the relationship between families and industrialization to be far less inevitable, linear, and rigid than previously conceived (Lee 1987, 63). In other words, industrialization does not necessarily generate the kinds of changes in family life that Goode outlined, such as a shift to a nuclear

family structure that is more egalitarian in its internal relations. Harvan's (1982) historical study of factory workers, for example, shows how exposure to the industrial workplace reinforced rather than destroyed the extended kin ties of workers.

In fact, scholars of immigrant life have become increasingly concerned not with processes of change in immigrant life but rather with the persistence and the adaptive role of immigrant ties and institutions. There has been a discovery and even a celebration of the strength and resilience of immigrant institutions and their roles in facilitating the economic survival and adaptation of their members in the new society. I suggest that this trend can be understood in part as a counterreaction to the assimilation model's tendency to denigrate immigrant institutions, to conceive them as backward, outmoded, and dysfunctional. The interest in adaptation also grows out of a concern for assigning agency to immigrants, in contrast to the assimilation model's view of immigrants as being passively "acted on" by the forces of change (Kivisto 1990, 463).

In a variety of ways, current social science research and thinking about immigrant life reflects these concerns. On an empirical level, there has emerged a large body of work on diverse immigrant groups, ranging from European immigrants at the turn of the century to Cuban, Mexican, and Korean immigrants in the contemporary United States, that documents the salience of immigrant ties and institutions to economic adjustment (Min 1988; Morawska 1985; Portes and Bach 1985). For example, ethnic economic enclaves—concentrations of businesses owned and operated by co-ethnics—have been identified as potentially critical to the economic adaptation of many immigrants, providing them with jobs, training, and opportunities for advancement. More generally, immigrant ties may be "sources of information about outside employment, sources of jobs inside the community, and sources of credit and support for entrepreneurial ventures" (Portes and Rumbaut 1990, 88).

Theoretical perspectives on ethnicity have also shifted in recent years. The term "ethnic group" is generally understood by social scientists to refer to a group that shares a collective identity, based on the group's perception of a common culture or shared national origins. The root origins of ethnicity or ethnic identity are, however, a matter of some debate. Many scholars working in the assimilationist framework saw ethnic ties to be inherent or primordially rooted, stemming from a common heredity or sense of group origins. Scholars today, however, have moved to a situational view of ethnicity, one that sees ethnicity as socially generated and

constructed (Okamura 1981). [The situational perspective emphasizes the dynamic qualities of ethnic affiliation and boundaries, and the *active* role of the ethnic group in generating and providing meaning to ethnic group membership. In this framework, the external structural conditions encountered by the immigrant group following migration play a more-or-less crucial part in shaping the strength and character of ethnic identity and institutions. In other words, ethnicity is, in part, a reactive response of the immigrant group to the conditions they encounter. It may be understood as a strategic resource that is activated by the group in their efforts to survive and to achieve in the new society. In short, ethnicity is not "given" but rather something that the ethnic group actively and selectively constructs in response to the circumstances it faces.]

So far as immigrant familial institutions is concerned, much of the current scholarship in this area focuses specifically on the household, which is defined as a co-residential unit into which resources are brought together and organized to meet the needs of household members. The immigrant household is viewed as a strategic arena, a social site within which members collectively construct strategies that will help them to survive and realize collective goals (Dinerman 1978; Massey et al. 1987; Perez 1986). With its focus on the construction of strategies, this approach appeals to the growing need to assign agency to immigrants. It is an approach that also allows immigrant familial institutions to be seen not as obsolescent and irrelevant but as adaptive social forms that are strategically used by immigrants to realize their goals.

In this general shift in focus that I am describing, from assimilation to adaptation, perspectives on gender divisions within immigrant life have also shifted. The assimilationist assumption that migration fosters women's emancipation has been dismissed, bolstered by growing evidence that migration, like economic development, may not be beneficial for women. Women in the midst of such social changes may actually lose their traditional sources of support and power. In the domestic sphere, for example, immigrant women may lose the power and authority they used to have over children. Women may also lose economic resources when migration or economic development diminishes their access to and control over production processes (Beneria and Sen 1981; Deutsch 1986).

Indeed, recent scholarship on immigrant women emphasizes not the liberating consequences of migration for women but the disadvantaged status held by many immigrant women within the majority society. Terms such as *multiple jeopardy* and *triple oppression* increasingly

dominate discussions of immigrant women's and, more generally, racial-ethnic women's experience (Brettell and Simon 1986, 10; King 1988). These terms refer to the multiple disadvantages experienced by these groups of women, as racial-ethnic minorities, as women, and as inhabitants of the lower rungs of the social class ladder. This emphasis on racial-ethnic women's oppression within the majority society has been accompanied by an altered view of the relationship of women to immigrant institutions and institutions. Feminist scholars have suggested that immigrant institutions are not just arenas of patriarchal oppression but also sites of resistance, or vehicles by which groups struggle to survive (Caulfield 1974; Glenn 1986; Thornton-Dill 1988). Evelyn Nakano Glenn, for example, describes the racial-ethnic family as a "bulwark against the atomizing effects of poverty and legal and political constraints" (1991, 194-95). While immigrant women may struggle against the oppression they experience as women *within* immigrant institutions, the oppression they experience from the majority society as members of a racial-ethnic group may generate needs and loyalties of a more immediate and pressing nature. Thus immigrant women may remain attached to and indeed support traditional (i.e., premigration) family structures. This is due not simply to their entrenched cultural beliefs or conservatism but also to the benefits that women gain from retaining these structures, given the multiplicity of disadvantages they face in social and economic realms outside the ethnic community. In other words, for women, immigrant institutions are ways of coping and adapting to the new society, and this consideration may override their concern with gender inequalities within these institutions.

To summarize, a focus on the adaptive role of immigrant institutions appears as a significant point of convergence in current social science scholarship on immigrant life. Although insightful in many respects, this singular emphasis on adaptation neglects the essentially conflicted character of immigrant life. I suggest that recognition of the enduring and positive value of immigrant institutions must be balanced by a consideration of change and conflict within them.

CONFLICT AND CHANGE IN IMMIGRANT LIFE

An emphasis on the notion of adaptation, central to the literature on the immigrant experience, has led to a neglect of the divisions and conflicts of immigrant life. To see immigrant institutions only as vehicles of adaptation and resistance to oppression by the majority society implies a uni-

formity of experience and interest within immigrant groups. But to what extent is this true? For example, do all members participate and benefit in the same way from immigrant institutions? It seems essential to explore the divisions of immigrant life and the ways in which members may gain very different kinds of benefits and rewards from immigrant institutions.¹⁴

The current tendency to ignore or downplay the internal fissures of immigrant life is perhaps best exemplified by the literature on household strategies. Here it is simply assumed that the household is a unified social group, constructing strategies in a manner that is consensual and democratic and benefits all members equally. The construction and implementation of strategies is unmarred by conflict, resistance, and noncompliance among household members. As feminist scholars have pointed out, these assumptions of democracy, altruism, and consensus reflect an idealized view of the household—one in which age and gender do not create basic distinctions in family experience and interests (Benería and Roldán 1987; Thorne 1982; Wolf 1990).

Immigrant institutions are not only internally divided but also fluid and shifting in their organization and dynamics. Central to understanding processes of change in immigrant institutions are the social and economic conditions encountered by the immigrant group in the "host" society. Scholars of ethnicity have called attention to the important role played by external structural forces in determining the strength of ethnicity and the forms in which it is expressed (Nagel and Olzak 1982; Yancey, Erickson, and Juliani 1976). For example, when immigrant groups encounter hostility or are excluded from participation in the economic mainstream, ethnic solidarities may become particularly strong. It is not simply shared culture or origins that foster ethnicity but also the circumstances and constraints the immigrant group faces in the new society.

In comparison to current scholarship on ethnicity, discussions of immigrant familial institutions have been less attentive to the effects of structural conditions in shaping them (Zinn 1990). Perhaps because so much of research has focused on the part played by the immigrant family in *facilitating adaptation* to the "host" society, there has been a neglect of how "host" society conditions shape the organization and dynamics of immigrant family life. The focus on cultural determinants has been particularly sharp in discussions of Asian American families (Glenn 1983).

¹⁴ Some current research on the dynamics of ethnic enclave economies has begun to explore this point, by looking at how men and women derive different material rewards from work in the ethnic enclave economy (Zhou and Logan 1989).

CHAPTER ONE

Whereas research on the family life of African Americans has highlighted the impact of structural conditions (Gutman 1976; Stak 1974), Asian American families have been widely perceived in cultural terms.

In contrast to such cultural explanations, I suggest that immigrant families must be analyzed in relation to the external structural conditions encountered by immigrants in the "host" society. These structural conditions provide the fundamental parameters—the opportunities and constraints—within which immigrants must construct their family life. Immigrants' responses to these structural conditions are, however, affected by the cultural baggage, or experience and understandings about the world, that they bring with them to the new society. Thus for example, with respect to familial institutions, I suggest that immigrants draw on pre-migration family experiences and ideologies in their efforts to construct families within the structural context of the new society. The ideologies on which immigrants draw are, however, not static or "given" but shifting and emergent. These ideologies are also multidimensional, composed of intersecting and often contradictory elements. Too often, discussions of immigrant life paint a monolithic and one-dimensional picture of the premigration culture of immigrants; in an effort to trace in a simple manner the effects of this culture on the group's life after migration.

Besides this interplay of structural conditions with immigrant culture, I suggest that the internal divisions of immigrant life are central to the dynamics of change in immigrant communities. The differing interests of immigrant group members mean that they will disagree and thus negotiate over the shape of immigrant institutions. For example, young and old members of the immigrant group may feel differently about the appropriate organization of community institutions. The processes by which these community institutions emerge and develop will reflect this division, as young and old immigrants struggle with one another to shape community institutions in the ways that they desire. Similarly, gender conflicts and negotiation are critical to understanding the development of immigrant familial institutions. Immigrant families are simultaneously sites of adaptation for men and women, and arenas of conflict and struggle between men and women. The development of immigrant families as well as other institutions is a gendered process. Women and men clash over the reshaping of these institutions, attempting to fashion them in ways that enhance their interests, both as members of the immigrant group and as men or women. I suggest that the struggle between men and women to shape immigrant institutions will vary in its strength and visibility, depending on the balance of power between women and men in the immigrant

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group. This balance of power is deeply shaped by the immigrant men's and women's comparative access to and control over economic, political, and social resources in the dominant society (Blood and Wolfe 1960; Blumberg 1991). Particularly when migration is concurrent with a drastic shift in the resources of women and men relative to each other, the gender-based struggle to control immigrant institutions may become especially blatant.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

In the following chapter ("The Study and the Setting") I provide information on the particular setting of the study, my research methods, and the social background of my informants. Chapter 3 ("Vietnamese Roots") explores the historical and cultural roots of the Vietnamese American experience, piecing together information from secondary sources and the life histories of informants. I pay special attention to the lives of urban pre-1975 middle-class South Vietnamese and their traditions and experiences of family life and gender relations. Chapter 4 ("Patchworking: Households in the Economy") explores Vietnamese American responses to the economic conditions of life in the United States, focusing on the part played by household structure and ideologies of family life in mediating these responses. Chapter 5 ("The Family Tightrope: Gender Relations") looks at how migration shifted the relative resources of men and women in favor of women, thus changing the gender balance of power. I look at the consequences of the shift in the gender balance of power for men's and women's experience of family life. Chapter 6 ("Generation Gaps") explores another migration-induced shift in the balance of power in Vietnamese American families, that between the generations. I analyze the familial experiences and attitudes of the young, paying close attention to the effects of differentiation in age and family circumstances.