FILM AUSTRALIA'S IMMIGRATION DVD

Interview with Pham Van Lam
Questions by Paul Byrnes and Penelope McDonald

Q: How did the filmmakers first contact you and what did they ask you to do?

PVL: In April 1982, my family arrived in Australia from Malaysia. An Australian film company wanted to make a film related to Indonesian history. The film was *The Year of Living Dangerously*. They needed Asian extras and went to migrant hostels to recruit them. We were living at the Endeavour Hostel in Maroubra, where they interviewed some refugee families. There were only a few Asians there at that time. Luckily, my family was selected.

Q: Can you remember much about your first meeting with Tony Wheeler?

PVL: I did not meet Tony Wheeler at first. Pauline Chan came looking for people to play extras in the film, she knew Tony Wheeler. When she was about to graduate [from the Australian Film, Television and Radio School], she wanted to make a film telling a story of migrants integrating into the Australian society. She saw the older children in my family doing well at school, how much we loved animals, how hard we tried to get jobs, and she chose my family, as typical, newly arrived migrants. One of my sons was presumed to have died when fleeing Vietnam, but later he was found alive. He had resettled in Holland and was about to visit us. My son coming to visit us was the reason Mr Wheeler made the film and called it
The Visit.

Q: Did you expect a film crew to spend so much time with you?

PVL: Yes, we did. Before making the film, Pauline Chan and Tony had explained the project to me, saying that our daily activities would be followed. They would show what the parents and children did every day at home, however late we stayed up. On many occasions, Tony was filming past midnight until one o'clock in the morning and then at about four o'clock that morning he was filming again. Usually, by four o'clock in the morning, my wife was awake, preparing food for the older children to go to work [one at Telecom and the other at Australia Post] and getting the transport ready for the younger children to go to school.

Q: Did you feel [the filmmakers] were disrupting your life?

PVL: There was no disruption. When finished filming for the day, they went away and returned the next morning.

Q: Did you consult with your family before you agreed to be involved?

PVL: Not really. According to our customs, the man makes the decisions for the family. After Tony proposed it, I realised the film would benefit the [Vietnamese] community and I did not hesitate to accept his offer.

Q: Let's talk about the making of the film. [Shows a short scene] Can you remember much about the making of that scene?

PVL: I realised the film was good and appropriate to that time. The film was made in 1985, seventeen or eighteen years ago when the situation was very different. Once fleeing the country, we thought we would never have any chance of going back to Vietnam. Not until 1993 or 1994 did the communists change their policies to allow refugees the possibility of returning to visit their homeland. In truth, I thought when arriving here that there was no hope of ever returning. Pauline asked if we missed our parents. As I was holding my parents' photos, I thought I would not be able to meet them again before they died. I felt so moved and could not stop crying.

Q: But that hasn't happened?

PVL: Luckily, the communists later allowed refugees to return to Vietnam. Fortunately, the Buddha protects us and my parents are still alive, my father is 95 years old and my mother is 93.

Q: Did you ask them to come and live with you in Australia?

PVL: In 1994, I sponsored [my parents] to come here for a year, after that they went home. I intended to sponsor them to stay here for good but my parents said the climate was not suitable and they did not want to stay. Now I visit them every year in Vietnam. In mid November [2003] I will go back again.

Q: When the film was made, did you feel the migration was worthwhile?

PVL: When I left Vietnam, I did not think of resettling in Australia or of going to any particular country; we just wanted to get out of Vietnam. The communists discriminated against those of us who worked for the former government. The children of officials who served in the former government, regardless of how intelligent they were, would never pass the entrance examination for university. The film showed that my daughter, who had completed school, failed to get into university for three consecutive years.

Q: And so the decision to leave Vietnam was clear. What about your first years in Australia?

PVL: When we were at a refugee camp in Malaysia, we were accepted to go to the US by an American immigration delegation. We were about to go there when one of my friends, who was the camp representative, told me that the Australian delegation would accept our whole family without applying prescribed criteria for individuals. Some close friends also told me that life in America was very hectic while life in Australia was more peaceful. So when the Australian delegation came, I applied to go to Australia. The Australian delegation was very kind. After interviewing us, they asked if my daughters had boyfriends or my sons had girlfriends. When we asked them why they wanted to know, they said that their boyfriends and girlfriends could go as well. They also asked how many members there were in my family. I said I had a brother-in-law who was a former commissioned officer with the RVNA, a younger sister and a nephew. The Australian delegation told me that there was no need to interview them, they would all be accepted. Within ten days of being accepted, we were transferred to a transit camp. We were ready to go in only ten days.

There was not much difference between our standard of living in Vietnam before 1975 and that of our Australian standard of living. Poorer people may have found life was better than before. My standard of living before 1975 and the one I have now is not much different. The only thing I did not have before is freedom.

Q: The scene at the bus stop is a very beautiful and emotional moment, what do you recall about making it?

PVL: I was spontaneously moved at that scene in the film, I was not acting. Parents were getting old and, in many families, children did not see their parents before they passed away. If we were in such a situation, I felt how sad it would be.

I remember on that day, on the way home from the taxation or immigration office, we stopped and had a rest at a bus stop. Pauline then asked a few additional questions and my son talked about discrimination in Holland. In any country, there is always a minority group of racists. Refugees fled to countries with customs different to their own. A newly arrived refugee did not know the customs of the place and made mistakes, causing resentment from some members of the native-born people. Hypothetically, if these people were in our shoes and had to flee to another country with different customs and ways of life, I wonder what would they do?

Q: Did Pauline give you any instructions or work out what you were to say in advance?

PVL: No, she did not coach us on what to say. She asked Kiet [my son] if there was racial discrimination in Holland. My son answered and I joined in with him to follow up the topic.

Q: How long did that conversation go on for?

PVL: Just about 15 to 20 minutes. Not long.

Q: Could you tell us about your escape from Vietnam and how you got to Malaysia?

PVL: That was a complicated journey. I was the head inspector in Region Four, supervising the taxation of sixteen Western provinces. I inspected all the sixteen province offices on tax matters, so I could travel inside Vietnam and look for ways to organise an escape. Trying to flee then was difficult. It was two years later in 1981, when I went to Ha Tien, a coastal town near my parents' birthplace, that I was finally able to organise the journey. The first attempt was unsuccessful. We succeeded on the second trip.

In Ha Tien, the communists were not well organised. The head of the municipality was a woman. I told her how, many years ago, my father had had a fishing boat. Now the government wanted to develop the fishing industry. I had some capital and I intended to buy a fishing boat. She knew I had tried other business ventures, in transport and an ice-making factory, but had so far failed. She said that according to rumors, my family sooner or later would escape. If one wanted to escape, I said, it was not necessary to be in Ha Tien, one could escape over the mountains — it was government policy that would make people flee out of the country. We argued, and she thumped her fist on the table angrily. She told me to wait for a few days before she made up her mind. But I had already prepared to flee. Today I argued with her, tomorrow I was on the way out of the country.

Q: So you didn't buy your fishing boat?

PVL: No, I did not. I went with other people. I was released [from prison] in 1979 and not until two years later, in November 1981, was I able to escape.

Q: You were in prison?

PVL: [After the communist victory] they sent the public servants and soldiers of the former government to a 're-education camp' for fifteen days. As we knew it, some stayed fifteen to seventeen years. They called it re-education but this is not correct because there was no such thing as rehabilitation. The communists said that even commissioned officers were less responsible [for resistance] than the taxation officials who collected money to fund the military to fight against them. So, [in their eyes] my guilt was greater than the soldiers'. [In prison], we were poorly fed. We worked seven or eight hours a day. Before I had worked with a pen and now I had to work with a shovel, digging soil.

The communist victory was a result of an international arrangement. The South Vietnamese collapse was due to the betrayal by Americans, who tried to reach an agreement with the super powers. I do not think that the South could have lost on a military front. After conquering the South, the communists tried to destroy the bourgeois and commercial classes. They had a policy of revenge. They took assets from the South and brought them north. Some low-ranking officials were allowed to work for a while. Some fled overseas leaving their homes behind them, which the government confiscated. Others tried to organise trips to escape. We tried to bear all the misery, but we found it too hard. The communists put more weight on political allegiance than skills. The government tried to extort money from the ethnic Chinese and expel them. Even though our children were brilliant they could not continue their study. My daughter finished school but was failed three times on her entrance exam to university. The chancellor of Can Tho University is a friend of her adopted 'grandpa' who was a confidant of the Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet. Her grandpa sent a letter to the chancellor to assist her. But after the third time the chancellor admitted that it was government policy that children of officials and officers of the former government were not to be admitted into the university. It was blatant discrimination.

Q: Could you tell us more of what happened to you after the communist victory and how you escaped Vietnam?

PVL: I did not escape from the camp. Any one who was well educated could be released early. However, if you worked well they would not release you early, they would keep you longer to use your skills. They tried to snatch my motor vehicle but my wife refused to give in.

In 1978, I was due to be released but I was kept for another year because I used to be a taxation officer. The next year, again my name was not on the release list. Then, I was used as an accountant so they let me have some time out of the camp. When I visited my family, people from the prosecutor's office tried to extort money from us. I arranged to tape the whole conversation for future use, just in case. I befriended a security officer and, somehow, the next year I was released. Otherwise, I might have used the tape to denounce their corruption.

Q: From Vietnam, you escaped with your family by boat to Australia. What do you think about the current debates about people arriving in Australia by boat?

PVL: In the years 1975 to 1981, when the communists had just conquered the South, most of the boat people were genuine refugees who could not live in the authoritarian regime. Recently, some boat people who have tried to flee Vietnam, I think, are not political refugees. Out of ten boat people, maybe two or three are genuine political refugees and the rest are probably not.

Q: How do you feel about arrivals of boat people in general who are not necessarily Vietnamese, and how they are treated?

PVL: Do you mean recent boat people? [Confirmed.] It is very hard to say, particularly if considering migration zones. Recently some boats came close to shore, that is, inside the Australian migration zone. In this case, I think the government should adhere to its own law and the boat people should be processed in Australia. If they are found to be refugees, they should be allowed to stay. If not, they should be repatriated. Instead, Mr Ruddock kept them on islands, thousands of kilometres away from the Australian mainland. It was a waste of money and not beneficial to anyone.

Q: A lot has changed in your life since you came from Vietnam to Australia. Do you think Australia has treated you well? What do you think of your life in Australia now?

PVL: As to my situation, our standard of living before 1975 was not much different to that of Australians', although the poorer people in Vietnam had to work very hard to survive. In Australia, even if you do not have any job, you are not going to starve. The welfare system is excellent. For those who work here, their life is busier than their Vietnamese counterparts. In Vietnam, when the husband has a job, he gets allowances for his wife and children and earns enough money to support the whole family. In Australia, the husband's income alone is not enough to support the family, so the wife also works. The family with one income is usually in dire financial straits. But, in Australia, we are free, so the main difference for us is freedom.

Q: Are you happy you participated in the film? What was your family's reaction to being in the film?

PVL: I am very happy. There were more positive reactions than negative ones. The negative ones came from my younger children who were shy and did not like being filmed. I remember Tony and Pauline had to make monkey faces to coax the kids out so that they could be filmed.