

Hope of Freedom



Painting by Trinh Quoc Lap, Project Ngoc Records, UCI Libraries Southeast Asian Archive

Project Ngoc's Decade of Dedication

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An exhibit in the
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In the years after the fall of Saigon in 1975, over two million Southeast Asians fled their home countries. While many successfully resettled in new countries, many others perished at sea or lingered for years in refugee camps and detention centers yearning for freedom. At UC Irvine, a group of dedicated students responded to the growing refugee crisis and organized to effect change at an international level. With the motto, "In this darkness, we find a pearl of light," they formed Project Ngoc in 1987 to help relieve the suffering of refugees.

Project Ngoc members wrote, "With the deep belief that students represent the conscience of society, Project Ngoc's members work enthusiastically to increase public awareness of the refugee situation. The refugee problem, we believe, is a difficult one which requires the care and effort of many people in order to arrive at humane solutions. Helping the refugees is not only a humanitarian gesture, it is our duty." (Project Ngoc pamphlet, available in seaadoc.lib.uci.edu).

This exhibit celebrates the power of student activism while also remembering the many tragedies of the Southeast Asian refugee crisis. We hope it will show new generations of students that with passion, vision, organization, and dedication, students can transform lives at home or even thousands of miles away.

Escape

Project Ngoc sent many volunteers to assist asylum seekers in the camps. In the summer of 1990, a Project Ngoc member worked with artists detained in the Whitehead Detention Centre in Hong Kong. According to a Project Ngoc newsletter (July 1991, v. III, no. 2), the artists readily gave the volunteer a variety of art produced in the camp with the plea: "When you return to the States, please exhibit these so that the rest of the world can learn about our relentless search for freedom – so that the rest of the world knows of the prison that is our lives. Do not let them forget about us."

Artists in camps had few supplies and created art with what little materials were available. They painted on the backs of recycled cardboard signs, on the other side of a completed work, or over previous works.

In this exhibit, we display artwork completed on cardboard, paper, and canvas, with oil paint, watercolor, acrylic, ink, and crayon. Because of the fragility and large sizes of the original artwork in the Project Ngoc Records, here we exhibit smaller reproductions. When known, we have provided the name of artist, the date and the title of piece, and brief biographical information.

The works displayed in this case portray themes of escape. They depict the dangerous journey refugees took across the seas, where many became victims of dehydration, drowning, piracy, rape, or death.

1. **Introductory Timeline.**
2. **"Benediction."** Dao Vu Bang, date unknown.

Dao Vu Bang was 17 years old when he completed the watercolor painting "Benediction." He and his two brothers (Dao Vu Nguyen, age 16, and Dao Vu Minh, age 10) were very talented young artists. They could often be seen in Section 2 of the Whitehead camp painting together. The brothers arrived in Hong Kong on August 29, 1988. At that time they had no idea where their parents were. "We fled Vietnam after my parents and one of my sisters were arrested and put in prison. I believe they were arrested because my father fought against the (Communist) North in the war." -- Dao Vu Bang.

3. a. **Photograph of artist Bui Duc Luc.** Date unknown.
- b. **"The Fate of Those Who Seek Freedom."** Bui Duc Loc, date unknown.

This painting depicts the dangers of the journey across the water to "freedom" in Hong Kong. Not only had the boat people lost their homeland, but they also had little control of their future as asylum seekers. Their circumstances often left them feeling like "orphans of the world."

4. **"Fate of the Boat People."** Thac Vien, 1990.
5. **"Commemorating Those Who Die on Their Way to Freedom."** Artist unknown, date unknown.
6. **"Nightmare."** Trinh Quoc Lap, 1990.

Escape

The Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975 marked the end of the Vietnam War, which had raged in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos for over a decade. Approximately 130,000 Vietnamese and Cambodians with ties to the U.S. government were evacuated shortly after that. This marked the first wave of Southeast Asian migration. In 1977 through the mid-1980s, a second wave of refugees fled Vietnam and surrounding areas, largely in reaction to the new Communist government's political, economic, military, and agricultural policies and programs. Most of these refugees escaped by boat, a third to half of whom perished at sea. The 1990s saw a third wave of migration. Many of these refugees were assisted by organizations or arrived through government-sponsored programs. In total, about two million people fled.

7. **"Guidelines for the Disembarkation of Refugees."** United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR, 1988.
Boat refugees in distress signaled commercial ships to rescue them, but they were often ignored. To promote rescue at sea, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees offered ship-owners reimbursement for picking up boat refugees. The guidelines for refugee disembarkation—the act

of going ashore from a ship—were spelled out in this booklet for those operating large ships in the South China Sea.

8. **Map showing usual boat refugee routes.** "Guidelines for the Disembarkation of Refugees." United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR, 1988.
9. **"Fleeing Vietnamese are rescued in the South China Sea by a Médecins du Monde rescue boat."** *Forced Out: The Agony of the Refugee in Our Time*. Carole Kismaric. New York, NY: Random House, 1989.
10. a. ***Stormy Escape: A Vietnamese Woman's Account of Her 1980 Flight Through Cambodia to Thailand*.** Kim Ha. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1997.

In this text, Refugee Kim Ha describes her family's first attempt to leave South Vietnam by land. In their second attempt in March 1980—also by land—the family took two weeks to get to Camp Northwest 9 at the Thai-Cambodian border, where they stayed for a few months. From there they went to the Panat Nikhom Holding Center for three months, before spending a few days at the Rangsit Transit Center (Bangkok) in October 1980. From Bangkok, the family flew to Los Angeles.

- b. **Handwritten manuscript in Vietnamese of Qua con bao du** (translated into *Stormy Escape*) page 33.
- c. **Photos of Kim Ha and her family:** page 23 (in 1976, before their first escape attempt) and page 224 (in 1980 at Panat Nikhom Holding Center in Thailand).

Camps

This section includes artwork and photographs from the various open and closed camps in Hong Kong and Thailand. The camps, even those that were open, were very oppressive and confining. The living spaces were small cubicles (typically 3' x 5' x 7'), often stacked in barracks three or four high. There was no privacy; water was rationed; other resources were limited; plumbing systems were often unavailable, and activities in the camps were controlled. The artwork from the camps often depicts these deplorable conditions.

11. a. **Thailand camp at Panat Nikhom: "Getting Water."** Nguyen Quang Truong, 1989.

The Panat Nikhom camp did not have plumbing. Individuals had to wait in line to obtain water and carry it back to their families. Ten liters of water was rationed daily for a family of five, intended to address all water needs for the day.

- b. **Thailand camp at Panat Nikhom: "From the Corner of Vu Kim Bang's House."** Nguyen

Quang Truong, 1990.

- c. **"One Corner of Camp Panat Nikhom."** Nguyen Quang Truong, 1990.

Nguyen Quang Truong was from Gia Dinh, Vietnam. He escaped to Thailand in December 1988. He was 27 when these watercolor and ink paintings were done in a camp in Panat Nikhom, Thailand. Nguyen Quang Truong began learning how to paint in 1985 and studied art at Gia Dinh Art Academy for three years. He had a great ability to depict landscapes and everyday scenes of camp life, although he also enjoyed drawing portraits. According to Project Ngoc, Nguyen Quang Truong left Thailand and was resettled in the U.S. in January 1991. At that time he hoped to continue to improve his artistic skills and to do more portrait painting.

12. **"Camp Life."** Project Ngoc members, date unknown.

Photographs compiled and captions written by Project Ngoc. The camps depicted in the photographs include Cape Collison closed camp, Whitehead Detention Camp, Argyle Camp, and Camp Chi Ma Wan. Project Ngoc often highlighted the plight of children in the camps, many of whom were born there and never experienced life outside.

13. **Journal of Thuy Vinh Tran.** Thuy Vinh Tran. Not published, circa 1990.

Thuy Vinh Tran was a member of Project Ngoc who went to Hong Kong and worked with others in the Whitehead Detention Centre. He kept this daily journal during his time there, which was a requirement of Project Ngoc volunteers who went abroad. One of the students working with Thuy Vinh Tran, Pamela Baker, was later banned from the camps for political reasons.

14. **Photograph of Tran Duy Tai, young boy.** Date unknown.

15. a. **Children's art (from a class of sixth graders): "Freedom Is the Only Desire of All Those Who Live in the Camps."** Tran Thanh Lam, date unknown.

In the Project Ngoc Records, there are ten paintings and drawings done by children in the camps. The two examples here were made by sixth graders. The images of the camps are similar to each other, prominently displaying the barbed wire fencing that restrained their activities.

- b. **Children's art (from a class of sixth graders): "Camp 1B."** Artist unknown, date unknown.

16. **"Family Life (Whitehead Detention Centre)."** Hoang Quoc Bien, date unknown.

Hoang Quoc Bien studied at the Hanoi Art College but was forced to stop his studies and join the army in 1966. He served for 10 years and was allowed to paint, but after leaving the army he was no longer permitted to practice his art. He went to Hong Kong in September 1988. When

he spoke with Project Ngoc representatives in the camp in 1991, he had been at Whitehead Detention Centre for over two years. His application for asylum had been denied twice and he was facing forced repatriation. At that time (and to his great delight), two of his three sons were aspiring artists.

17. **"Barbed Wire."** Artist unknown, date unknown.
18. a. **"Refugee camp: Artist with his Paintings."** Nguyen Quang Phuc, ca. 1990.
b. **"A Love Between a Mother and Her Child."** Nguyen Quang Phuc, date unknown.
19. ***Ethnocide: A Cultural Narrative of Refugee Detention in Hong Kong.*** Joe Thomas. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000.
 - a. "Vietnamese Asylum Seekers: How they came to Hong Kong." (table 3.4, page 54)
 - b. "Piracy Encounters in the Gulf of Thailand" (table 3.5, page 55)
 - c. "Piracy encounters in the South China Sea off Malaysia" (table 3.6, page 56)
 - d. "Comparative Arrivals of Vietnamese Asylum Seekers in Southeast Asia Since ICIR II Conference July 1989-April 1994." (table 3.3, page 53)

These statistics concern refugees who arrived in Hong Kong and other first-asylum countries. By the late 1990s, when most of the camps had been closed, it was estimated that more refugees died in their escape attempts, or in the camps themselves, than who went on to resettlement.

Camps

Those who survived the perils of escape by boat or land were eventually placed in refugee camps, where they might be detained for months or even years. Camps were established in Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Indonesia. There, refugees waited for resettlement in a "third country"—one of permanent asylum. Camp conditions varied, but all were overcrowded and prison-like, with little sanitation or privacy.

20. ***Voices From the Camps: Vietnamese Children Seeking Asylum.*** James M. Freeman and Nguyen Dinh Huu. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2003. Map on page facing the title page shows camp locations in Southeast Asia.

Refugee camps were established in several countries in Southeast Asia to absorb those who escaped by boat and by land. At its peak in 1989, Hong Kong received 300 refugees daily. Two of the largest sites were the islands of Pulau Bidong (Malaysia) and Galang (Indonesia), where an estimated 500,000 boat people stayed between 1975 and 1996.

21. **Photograph of boat people detained in Hong Kong, undated.** SEAA Vertical Files.
22. **"Plan of Site 2 North" 1987 map of a refugee camp in Thailand.** Southeast Asia Resource Action Center records.
Larger camps were laid out like towns with main arteries and barracks-like buildings.
23. **Hong Kong, The Other Story: The Situation of Vietnamese Women and Children in Hong Kong's Detention Centres: a Report.** Diana D. Bui. Washington, DC: Indochina Resource Action Center, 1990.

Beginning in 1982, Hong Kong changed its "open camp" policy, which had allowed refugees to work outside the camps. By operating only closed camps, as shown in this cover photo, Hong Kong hoped to stem the influx of refugees.
24. **Gas Mask** (cloth) with handwritten "Freedom or Death...Whitehead detention centre, Hong Kong." Paul Tran collection.

When violence broke out in the camps due to protests over the squalid conditions, police quelled the disturbances by spraying the refugees with tear gas.

Politics

This artwork addresses the strong political perspectives of detainees. Unyielding feelings of anti-Communism are prevalent. Throughout the artwork are also images of hope and symbols of freedom, such as doves and the Statue of Liberty.

25. a. **"The Exchange."** Nguyen Quang Phuc, date unknown.

According to Project Ngoc, Vietnam received money from Britain for each person it received back from Hong Kong as "voluntary" repatriates. In this painting the Hanoi representative is smiling because the more people returned, the richer he becomes.
- b. **"Red Spider in Viet Nam."** Nguyen Quang Phuc, date unknown.

Nguyen Quang Phuc, a Sino-Vietnamese, was 43 years old when he completed these paintings. In Vietnam, he studied art for three years before being forced to join the army. He was later assigned to the Hanoi Art Company, where he was forced to produce propaganda posters for the government. His personal artwork criticized the government, and for this he was arrested several times and then placed in labor camps. His experiences in the camps are depicted vividly in his paintings. Upon his release, his art supplies were confiscated and he decided to flee Vietnam. He arrived in Hei Ling Chau camp in Hong Kong in December 1988. In February 1990 he was moved to Whitehead Detention Centre, where he lived with his wife, son, and daughter. The latest information about him in the Project Ngoc Records indicates that

his application for refugee status was refused, and his appeal was also rejected.

- c. **"The 'Magic' of Communist for the Writers and Artists."** Nguyen Quang Phuc, date unknown.

- 26. a. **"Rejection Letter."** Trinh Do, 1990.

In this piece, the artist reproduces a rejection letter which informs the detainee that he has been deemed an "economic migrant." Forced repatriation to Vietnam awaits him.

- b. **Tu Do (Freedom).** Issue 1, January 1, 1990. Trinh Do, editor.

A monthly newsletter published and distributed in Whitehead Detention Centre.

Trinh Do, from Thanh Hoa, Vietnam, was 34 years old when these art works were completed. He was a dissident artist in Vietnam, and was arrested and jailed in April 1988. In August 1988, he escaped from prison and left Vietnam a month later. He, his wife, and their ten year old son arrived in Hong Kong in January 1989, and were placed in the Whitehead Detention Centre. Trinh Do was also Chief Editor of a monthly camp newsletter, "*Tu Do*" (*Freedom*), which was produced by a board of editors and reporters from each section of the camp.

- c. **"Thinking of Hanoi."** Trinh Do, 1990.

Trinh Do used crayons in this piece, due to the lack of art supplies in the camp. He later received better supplies from camp volunteers.

- 27. **"Hope of Freedom."** Trinh Quoc Lap, date unknown.

Trinh Quoc Lap created this painting while living at Whitehead Detention Centre, Section 8. In simple but powerful images, he illustrates the determination of the detainees to seek peace and freedom even while imprisoned and shackled.

- 28. **"Humanity Beware."** Trinh Duy Khoa, 1993.

Trinh Duy Khoa was a detainee at Whitehead Detention Centre, Section 8. In this painting he warns all that Communism can rise up when least expected and that vigilance is always necessary.

- 29. **"Long Live Freedom."** Artist Unknown, 1992.

The Statue of Liberty is shown in this piece and appears as a central symbol of freedom in many of the pieces in the Project Ngoc Records.

Resettlement

As more and more refugees arrived at the camps, and countries of "first asylum" were overwhelmed by

the costs and demands, some began turning refugees away, claiming they were economic refugees, not political refugees. Some refugees were repatriated to their countries of origin. Procedures at the camp, country, and international level were established for taking in, recording, and processing refugees. While in camps, refugees applied for resettlement and waited their outcomes.

In the United States, sponsorship by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and family members already in the U.S. was the primary route to freedom. Those bound for the U.S. began vocational training, learning English, and learning about daily life and U.S. government before leaving their camp.

30. ***Refugees: the Challenge of the 80's: Report of Hearings conducted by the California State Social Services Advisory Board.*** Sacramento: California Dept. of Social Services: 1980. "United States Refugee Program: Interview, Acceptance, and Sponsorship into the United States."

This diagram illustrates the 20 steps established for refugees coming to America: Pre-Arrival (i.e., time spent in a refugee camp) through the end of Post-Arrival (refugee becomes self-sufficient in the U.S.). VOLAG (American Council of Voluntary Agencies) played an important role in the process.

31. ***"VOLAG BIO"*** form used by one of ten voluntary agencies to record personal and family details of refugees seeking resettlement. SEAA Vertical Files.

This form lists seven Laotian family members who, by 1980, had lived in a refugee camp in Thailand for two years. The Willows branch of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) voted to sponsor a refugee family. They contacted World Relief Refugee Services, a voluntary agency (VOLAG), who matched them with the Sathongnoth family. The parents and children (ages 1 through 14) arrived at the Sacramento Municipal Airport on January 28, 1980.

32. ***LAVAS: Legal Assistance for Vietnamese Asylum Seekers.*** Undated brochure. SEAA Vertical Files.

LAVAS was founded by Boat People SOS, which sent lawyers to first-asylum countries to assist in refugee resettlement. Project Ngoc raised funds for LAVAS through local Walk-a-Thons in 1991, 1994, and 1996.

33. ***Your New Country: A Guide to Language and Life in the U.S.A.*** American National Red Cross, 1975. In English and Vietnamese.

This booklet is an example of a bilingual guide to everyday American life, including phrases, questions, and simple descriptions of how the U.S. government works. Similar bilingual guides were written for speakers of Hmong, Laotian, and Khmer (Cambodian).

34. ***"The Overseas Refugee Training Program."*** Washington, DC: Bureau for Refugee Programs, U.S. Department of State, 1990.

This booklet describes training programs in camps to prepare adult detainees for jobs in the U.S.

35. **"The Future"** inaugural issue of a student-written newsletter in the Philippine Refugee Processing Center (PRPC).

The PRPC, funded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, was the last stop for refugees bound for resettlement countries. Up to 18,000 could stay there at any one time to be tested for tuberculosis, take care of bureaucratic details, and—for those heading to America—English lessons, Cultural Orientation (CO) and Work Orientation (WO). This newsletter gave PRPC students a chance to write in English for their peers.

Symbols

Art was an expressive outlet for refugees, and enabled them to engage with deep, personal feelings that might have been difficult to put into words. These paintings use symbols to reflect psychological traumas of escape, oppressive confinement in camps, the anxious limbo of waiting for resettlement, and dreams of freedom in the future.

36. **"Black Sun."** Dai Giang Nguyen, 1990.

A large oil painting focusing on women in the camps, the artist completed this while living in Block 14, Flat 14, at Pillar Point, Hong Kong.

37. a. **"Untitled."** Artist Unknown, 1992.

Two paintings full of symbolism: the constraints of the ever-present barbed wire, the bird of peace, the key to freedom, the eye perpetually spying and limiting freedom, and the bell of liberty.

- b. **"Event of the 21st Century."** Le Trung, 1993.

38. **"Boat people: a cry for freedom."** Artist unknown, 1990.

A large, hand-colored poster, states the purpose and background of Project Ngoc. Project Ngoc used this poster for the exhibits they organized to display refugees' paintings.

39. a. **"Why?"** Nguyen Quang Phuc, date unknown.

In these two paintings the artist uses a surreal, symbolic style to ask difficult questions. "Dreams and Reality" reflects on the day-to-day conditions of detainees, where the blurring between reality and dreams is clearly evident. "Why?" includes a large question mark, and addresses a wide range of questions: Why did the detainees have to undergo the conditions of

escape? Why are others free while they are not? Why does it all seem so unfair?

b. **"Dreams and Reality."** Nguyen Quang Phuc, 1990.

40. **"The Cards Are Revealed."** Trinh Duy Khoa, 1993.

Trinh Duy Khoa was a detainee in Whitehead Detention Centre, Section 8. This piece shows the "card" of Communism being revealed in a variety of symbols: the attempted balance of the key to freedom against heavier corruption of the Communists, the restrictions and limitations of the barbed wire, and perpetual spying limiting movement and freedom.

41. **Ephemera related to exhibit "Boat People: The Cry for Freedom."**

Three color postcards promote the Project Ngoc art exhibits in 1989.

Freedom

By the time Project Ngoc began its humanitarian activism in 1987, thousands of refugees had already arrived in the United States, and thousands more would continue to find freedom here.

Most refugees were flown to processing centers at U.S. military bases, where they lived temporarily in better quarters than the refugee camps had offered. From there, they traveled to their final U.S. destination, where sponsors welcomed them. They were now free.

42. **Southeast Asian Americans at a Glance: Statistics on Southeast Asian Adapted from the American Community Survey.** Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2011. "Refugee Arrivals to the U.S. from Southeast Asia... 1975-2010."

This table shows by year and country—Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam—the number of refugees who succeeded in making it to the U.S. By the late 1990s, when Project Ngoc disbanded, the numbers were decreasing, down from highs of 38,194 (from Cambodia in 1981), 55,500 (from Laos in 1980) and 125,000 (from Vietnam in 1975).

43. **Photos of refugees arriving by bus and plane at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, in 1975.** Fort Chaffee Photograph Collection of Vietnamese and Cambodian Refugees.

- a. Two adults and three children walk down the stairs from their temporary housing quarters.
- b. Man and boy looking out of a bus window.
- c. A soldier carries a baby off the plane.
- d. A boy is issued a pair of shoes

44. **Mien child's hat with red pompoms.** Guire Cleary and Jade B. Ngoc Le Collection of Hmong and Lu Mien Refugee Artifacts.

During 1979-1983, San Francisco was the first arrival point for the 50,000 refugees per year resettling in the U.S. from camps in Southeast Asia. They spent one night in a modest hotel and left the next day for their ultimate U.S. destination. This child's hat was one of the items left behind in the room.

The Origins and Accomplishments of Project Ngoc

Initiated as a class in 1987 by UCI graduate student Tom Wilson, Project Ngoc raised awareness about the plight of Southeast Asian refugees and provided direct relief to refugees detained in camps. Project Ngoc raised money to send UCI students to work as teachers, counselors, and translators in refugee camps in Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Thailand, and to lobby in Washington, D.C. on behalf of Southeast Asian refugees. In Orange County, they organized protests, vigils, art exhibits, concerts, and conferences. These ambitious UCI students had a tremendous impact at home and abroad. Project Ngoc disbanded in 1997, after most Vietnamese refugees had been resettled or repatriated.

45. **"Thuy and Ngoc Lan."** A Story by Thomas Wilson, 1987.

After reading a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) article about two Vietnamese girls brutally raped by pirates, Tom Wilson wrote this story to dramatize the tragedy. He circulated the story to UCI students to spark interest in the course he proposed to explore methods of helping Vietnamese boat people. Project Ngoc was named after the sister, Ngoc Lan, who perished at the hands of the pirates.

46. **Syllabus for the Vietnamese Refugee Experience Course (the beginning of Project Ngoc).** Spring 1987.

The origins of Project Ngoc may be traced to this class conceived by Tom Wilson and taught by Professor John Liu. In addition to reading and writing requirements, the course organized students into six committees focused on action. The course included students taking the class for credit as well as those who volunteered for no credit. From this class, Project Ngoc evolved into a student organization so that it could accomplish more concrete, long-term goals.

47. **"Carnage in the Gulf of Thailand."** *San Jose Mercury News*, April 8, 1987.

The atrocities committed by pirates, such as those described in this newspaper article, motivated Tom Wilson to action. He wrote the following appeal to students in the founding class for Project Ngoc:

"We have all grown up with the enchanting stories of Long John Silver, Captain Hook, and Bluebeard. Real pirates still sail the high seas, but they are not the benign characters of our childhood fantasies. These pirates rob and murder their victims. They rape little girls as well as

women. They leave alive only those women and girls that they can sell into prostitution.... Please join us as we attempt to help these victims of inhumanity re-establish the security, the dignity, and the honor which they so richly deserve."

48. ***Pirates on the Gulf of Siam: Report from the Vietnamese Boat People Living in the Refugee Camp in Songkhla-Thailand.*** Nhat Tien, Duong Phuc, Vu Thanh Thuy (English translation by James Banerian). San Diego, CA : Van Moch Graphics and Print, 1981.

One of the required readings for the Project Ngoc class.

49. **Photograph of Thomas Wilson in the Vietnamese Refugee Experience Course.** Spring 1987.
50. **"New UCI Class Seeks Help for Refugees."** By Penelope Moffet, *Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 1987.

51. **Materials about Project Ngoc and its Achievements**

In its 10 years of existence, Project Ngoc evolved from a group focused on raising awareness about Boat People to one deeply committed to direct action and advocacy. Most successful were their efforts to send volunteers, funds, and educational materials to refugee camps every summer. Hundreds of UCI students and other volunteers made this possible as they organized fund-raising and informational events on campus and in Little Saigon.

- a. "Introduction to Project Ngoc." In the program for the 1994 Van Nghe Thuyen Nhan (Culture Night).
- b. Project Ngoc brochure, 1994-1995.
- c. "A Decade of Dedications: 10 Years of Accomplishments." *Project Ngoc Newsletters*, Spring 1997.

Project Ngoc in the Camps

In 1987, a Catholic nun working for Caritas in Hong Kong asked Project Ngoc students for help. Her plea mobilized them to action, and they strategized to send UCI students, supplies, and toys to refugee camps in Hong Kong. This first visit was eye-opening.

Project Ngoc members came back energized not only to raise awareness about the conditions in the camps, but also to provide direct relief to refugees detained in these camps and to exert political pressure on governments to take in refugees. Project Ngoc members worked in camps in Hong Kong in 1987-1991 and 1994, in the Philippines in 1990, and in Thailand in 1988-1990. Collaborating closely with international volunteer agencies operating within the camps, they worked as teachers, translators, counselors, and recreation coordinators. They taught English, organized libraries, sponsored cultural events, and researched screening policies for individuals. They also raised money to build schools,

purchase supplies, and support other relief organizations in the camps.

UCI student Lam Vu held a voluntary leadership position in Hong Kong in 1989, during which he wrote about his experiences:

"It was in Argyle Detention Center that I began my work as an education coordinator for the International Social Service trying to run a school inside the camp. My staff consisted of 18 Vietnamese asylum seekers assisting over 450 children, whose ages ranged from 3 to 17 years old. The school was plagued by problems of morale, discipline, and interruptions by camp guards...we lacked textbooks, teaching materials, classrooms, and the liberty to teach during the evening and night.... Despite this, the school was the only normal part of the children's lives to which they could retreat." (Project Ngoc Newsletter, v. II no. 1, 1990).

52. ***The Forgotten People : Vietnamese Refugees in Hong Kong : A Critical Report.*** Project Ngoc (PEARL). Irvine, CA : Project Ngoc, University of California, Irvine, 1988.

In December 1987, Project Ngoc sent four UCI students for a three-week, fact-finding mission to five refugee camps in Hong King to investigate their conditions. Project Ngoc Chairman Van Tran wrote, "We thought that in order to best help and understand the needs of the Vietnamese refugees, our members must be able to see and hear for themselves the cries of those we want to offer help. It is also reasonable to assume that the refugees would want to see us because they believe that we can still help them. Our Christmas visit gave them a new lease on hope in a situation that seems almost helpless." (Project Ngoc, *The Forgotten People*, foreword) The UCI volunteers gathered stories, took pictures, published this report, and distributed it to members of Congress. The report gained the attention of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the U.S. Committee on Refugees.

53. **"Viet Refugees: People the World Forgot – UCI Students Making Efforts to Help Them."** *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 1988.

Within this article, Project Ngoc member Van Tran explains, "They are our brothers and sisters, and we who have successfully gotten out of Vietnam, I think, have an obligation to help those less fortunate than us." He noted that Project Ngoc members, in visiting the camps, "gained more by giving and learned the true meaning of humility in the face of pain and suffering."

- 54 a-e. **Photographs documenting refugee camp conditions**, 1987-1991.

55. **"Students Return from Visiting Refugees Exhausted, Inspired."** *Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 1988.

Project Ngoc students shared how they were touched by refugees' stories in this newspaper article. For example, Duc Au explained how a woman envisioned the students' arrival: "'She said that she knew someday a group of students would come and visit and help them. She said, 'It wouldn't be the older generation. But students.' We want to help them by never forgetting about

them. I told her about the Southeast Asian community here in the United States. I know we can help them. We have to.”

56. a-b. **Flyers advertising opportunities for UCI students to volunteer in refugee camps**, 1989, 1992.

57. **“Volunteer Duties and Responsibilities,”** circa 1990.

58. **“Project Ngoc Site II Report.”** Kirk Evans. Bangkok, Bangkok, Thailand, 1990.

Following his graduation from UCI in 1989, Kirk Evans worked as a Project Ngoc volunteer in the Philippines, Thailand, and Hong Kong. This journal records his experience in Thailand. All Project Ngoc volunteers were required to keep a log of their activities and experiences.

59. a-d. **Photographs of Project Ngoc members in the camps**, 1987-1991.

Project Ngoc’s Political Advocacy

In 1989 Project Ngoc adopted political advocacy as its third goal. Its first goal “was to keep the public informed and aware of the Vietnamese asylum seekers.” After the first fact-finding trip to Hong Kong in 1987, they adopted a second goal as they “recognized the need for direct relief in the camps.” But the events and issues surrounding the adoption and implementation of the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) at the Conference on Indochinese Refugees in Geneva in June 1989 altered their direction.

The CPA allowed asylum countries and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to screen all asylum seekers arriving after June 16, 1988 in Hong Kong or March 14, 1989 in other countries. The screening procedures were flawed, inconsistently applied, and often unfair. Project Ngoc “reacted to these inhumane and unfair actions by becoming more political active.” (Project Ngoc’s Newsletter, June 1993). They sent students to intern in refugee advocacy groups Washington, D.C. and bring back lobbying strategies to inform their work. Project Ngoc began organizing petition drives and letter-writing campaigns to deal with changes in refugee policies. They organized conferences, symposia, lectures, protests, and other events to build U.S. support to improve international policies.

60. a-b. **Letter and photograph from a policy-making conference on refugee rights**. Westminster, CA, 1989.

In May 1989, Project Ngoc members organized a conference with the Council for Refugee Rights in Westminster, CA where they collectively voiced strong opposition to refugee screening procedures and forced repatriation. Brochures were printed with the conference’s conclusions and members traveled to Geneva in June to distribute them.

61. a-e. **Photographs, flyer, and program for a Candlelight Vigil for Refugees.** Westminster, CA 1989.

In June 1989, on the eve of the Geneva Conference, Project Ngoc and other organizations hosted two candlelight vigils to show support for the human rights of refugees detained in camps. Project Ngoc members showed slides depicting camp conditions. Money raised for the event went to volunteers in Hong Kong camps. The Geneva Conference ratified the Comprehensive Plan for Action, which called for a mandatory screening process for all refugees and authorized forced repatriation.

62. a-c. **Letters and petition to politicians,** 1989-1991.

Project Ngoc members wrote many letters to congressional representatives to inform them about boat people and refugee camp conditions, oppose forced repatriation, protest UNHCR deprivation measures, encourage the expansion of asylum opportunities, and many other issues.

63. a-c. **Photographs and flyer for a Walk-a-thon for Refugees.** Westminster, CA 1991.

Project Ngoc and other groups organized a 10K Walk-a-thon for Boat People's Rights at Mile Square Park in Fountain Valley. Over 800 walkers turned out. The event raised over \$22,000 for LAVAS (Legal Assistance for Vietnamese Asylum Seekers), which sent volunteer attorneys and paralegals to refugee camps to provide assistance to asylum seekers.

64. a-b. **Photographs of a demonstration against forced repatriation in front of the British Consulate.** Los Angeles, CA 1989.

Project Ngoc on Campus and in the Community

Project Ngoc was a cultural presence at UCI and in Little Saigon. They organized art shows, banquets, dances, culture nights, theatrical performances, and other events to creatively reach new audiences and raise support for their causes. Like many other student groups, Project Ngoc members sold food on the Ring Road and participated with booths in Aldrich Park during Wayzgoose. Professors also allowed them to give 15-minute slide shows about refugee camp conditions at the conclusion of lectures. In Little Saigon, Project Ngoc set up informational booths at festivals. They displayed the powerful paintings they brought back from the refugee camps in galleries and shopping centers.

In a pamphlet, Project Ngoc members explained, "We believe that by sharing our concern and ideals through our activities we can bring together all of those in the community who care, especially the young and idealistic students, to help the refugees of the present, and to build a better Vietnamese community in the future."

65. a-e. **Exhibit poster and photographs of "The Boat People: A Cry for Freedom."** UC Irvine and Westminster, CA 1991.

In 1990, artists in the Whitehead Detention Centre in Hong Kong gave about 50 paintings to a Project Ngoc volunteer with the plea, "When you return to the States, please exhibit these so that the rest of the world knows of the prison that is our lives. Do not let them forget about us." Project Ngoc displayed the artwork in Westminster and UCI in 1991 and in the Rotunda of the Capitol Building in Washington, DC in 1993.

66. **April 30: Then and Now – A Day of Reflection and Progression materials.** Irvine, CA, 1995.

In order to create a sense of community among Vietnamese American students, Project Ngoc, along with UCI's Vietnamese American Coalition and the Vietnamese Student Association, organized a twentieth-anniversary commemoration of the Fall of Saigon. They sought to provide "an opportunity for individuals to explore their personal identity by disarming questions or opinions they may have in regards to April 30th, the history of the war, or the portrayal of the Vietnamese community today."

a-c. Club O' Noodles performance program and photographs.

d-e. Photographs of the candlelight vigil and march on the UCI campus.

f. Brochure for the April 30 conference.

67. a-c. **Culture Night (Van Nghe Thuyen Nhan) flyer and photographs.** Santa Ana, CA 1995.

Project Ngoc organized Van Nghe Thuyen Nhan in 1989-1990 and 1994-1995. The Culture Nights raised money for children in the refugee camps and featured professional singers and actors. For the 1994 and 1995 Culture Nights, Project Ngoc targeted the Vietnamese community in Orange County, rather than UCI students. The 1995 event was co-sponsored by UCLA's group, Vietnamese Reaching Out to Aid the Community (VRAC), and included over fifty performers.

68. **Tu-Uyen Nguyen letter of appeal to UCI students to support LAVAS.** Irvine, CA 1991.

69. **Photograph of Project Ngoc food booth on the Ring Road.** Irvine, CA 1989.

70. **Photograph of Project Ngoc booth at Wayzgoose.** Irvine, CA 1996.

71. **Photograph of Project Ngoc carwash.** Irvine, CA 1989.

