



A REFUGEE BOAT CALLED FREEDOM: CROSSING BORDERS AND LINKING COMMUNITIES AT THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM

Introduction

‘When we left I felt really, really scared but I prayed and tried to be brave. I still feel so frightened talking about it now.’

In September 1977, Tuyet Tran fled Vietnam with her husband Tan Lu, her three tiny children, and 34 others in a fishing boat called *Tu Do* or Freedom. Thirty years later, her fear is still palpable as she peers into the damp hull where she huddled for much of the voyage.

In 1990 the Australian National Maritime Museum acquired *Tu Do* - a refugee boat that had been sold by its Vietnamese owner Tan Lu after he reached Darwin in 1977. The following paper outlines the Maritime Museum’s rationale for acquiring *Tu Do*, the programs developed around the vessel so far, and its potential for crossing borders and linking communities. During Refugee Week 2005 the recently restored vessel was relaunched with members of the Lu family and the Vietnamese community. The event provided a fascinating case study for gauging this potential.

Why buy a refugee boat?

Until the mid 1970s almost all Australia’s migrants arrived by sea. Telling migration stories is a major part of our museum’s brief. We have more than 5,000 objects linked to migration in our collections, a gallery that explores these stories from first contact to the present, and a Welcome Wall engraved with the names of 15,000 migrants and their families.

Our historic fleet reflects these collecting themes. A Vietnamese refugee boat was seen as an evocative vehicle for exploring a key phase of Australia’s migration history. These were our first ‘boat people’ – whose arrival and acceptance both reflected the dismantling of the White Australia Policy and encouraged further reforms. While only 2,000 of Australia’s 200,000 strong Vietnamese population arrived by boat, escape by sea remains the defining narrative of the Vietnamese diaspora.

Refugees usually arrive with little, which makes telling their stories problematic for object-based museums. A refugee boat was very tangible evidence of one migrant journey.

Although most refugees today arrive by air, recent events attest to the fact Australia's physical proximity to Asia (and West Papua) and the threat of inundation from the sea still loom large in the national psyche. Historically, Australian migration policy has responded to a fear of 'the boat' – whether it carried Chinese diggers heading for the gold fields, South Sea Islanders recruited for the cane fields, or refugees from Indochina. Historian Andrew Jackubowicz has dubbed this condition 'penetration phobia – the loathing of unauthorised arrivals who breach the protective skin around the body politic' (1). Even in 1990 the museum recognised *Tu Do*'s potential as a symbolic hook for dissecting past and present immigration debates. By locating the boat's passengers, there was also opportunity for humanising and amplifying the experience of all asylum seekers.

Last but by no means least, the acquisition of *Tu Do* was seen as a means of engaging and involving Vietnamese communities. *Tu Do* could provide a stimulus for documenting their journeys, and a hub for community programs and events at the museum.

***Tu Do*'s story**

In 1995 curators used the Vietnamese press to locate Tan Lu and his family in Lismore, NSW. The museum flew Tan and his son Mo to Sydney to inspect *Tu Do*, advise on its configuration (which had changed little since the boat arrived), and piece together *Tu Do*'s remarkable story.

In brief, store owner Tan Lu had fought with the South Vietnamese during the war and believed his family faced a bleak future under the new communist regime. In 1975, he pooled resources with several friends from the island of Phu Quoc and built a boat. Deliberately constructed as dragnet fishing vessel typical of the region, *Tu Do* plied its trade in the island's waters for months to divert suspicion. Prior to leaving in September 1977, Tan staged an engine breakdown. A powerful replacement engine was installed and the group of 39 passengers, including Tan's pregnant wife Tuyet and three children Dzung (6), Dao (4) and Mo (2) struggled across the tidal flats to the waiting vessel. Tuyet had crushed sleeping pills into her children's food to quieten them and chaos erupted when several hours out to sea, they realised Dzung had been left behind. Despite pressure from his panicked passengers, Tan returned to find her.

The vessel outpaced pirates in the Gulf of Thailand and docked in Mersing, Malaysia where eight exhausted passengers disembarked. Tan had relatives in the United States, but after weeks of frustrating negotiations with US Immigration, opted to set sail for Australia. On 21 November 1977, *Tu Do* finally made landfall in Darwin. Tan and his crew had navigated more than 6,000 kilometres using a map ripped from the lid of a school desk and a simple compass.

In 1998 a museum curator travelled to Vietnam with Tan to locate and purchase replicas of provisions – bedding, crockery, toys, life jackets, and clothing – taken on *Tu Do*.

Acquired to fit out the vessel once restored, they have been displayed in other contexts including *Tears, Fears and Cheers* – a major exhibition on migration to Australia. In 2003 the museum completed a detailed vessel management plan for *Tu Do* and committed funds for restoring the boat to its appearance when it docked in Darwin in 1977.

As the restoration neared completion, the museum contacted the Lu family. We were shocked to discover that Tan Lu had been killed during a recent business trip to Vietnam. During Refugee Week 2005 the museum invited the rest of the Lu family to help relaunch the restored vessel. *Tu Do* was fitted out with replica provisions and opened to the public on the day of the event and the following weekend during our South East Asian seafood festival.

Relaunching *Tu Do*—a case study

The family's first encounter with *Tu Do* was intensely emotional. Tuyet wept as she slowly approached the boat for the first time in almost thirty years. The reunion was obviously tainted by the absence of her late husband, but on boarding *Tu Do* she literally *relived* the voyage. She described the anxiety of the escape, weeks curled up below deck too seasick and weak from her pregnancy to move, and the pervasive, oppressive sadness onboard. The museum recorded these memories and documented her descriptions of the lay out of the boat with water drums, tarps, nets, hammocks, plank toilet, and barricades.

Tuyet's memories of the escape were still raw. It had taken some persuasion from her children to make the journey to Sydney. While the experience was emotionally draining, Tuyet admitted that seeing *Tu Do* had ultimately help lay some of her ghosts to rest. 'I feel this boat is part of my story, but also part of me now' she said before leaving. She discussed her plans to visit *Tu Do* annually to commemorate her journey and pay her respects to a much-missed husband. For Tuyet, the boat has become both symbol and memorial.

Tuyet's daughters Dzung and Dao, now in their thirties, had initially been perplexed by the museum's interest in their family. Many of their Vietnamese friends had endured similar ordeals, and there was almost a sense of embarrassment that *Tu Do's* voyage had been so devoid of drama. The museum program and the enthusiasm of the public who inspected *Tu Do*, seemed to convince the sisters of the significance of their experience, both in terms of their family's history and Australia's migration story. In a card to the museum some weeks later, Dao wrote 'in rediscovering *Tu Do*, we also found our father'. Dzung requested copies of photographs taken of the family on *Tu Do* in 1977 to hang in her takeaway so, as she put it, 'our customers can understand a bit more of where my family comes from'.

Although fiercely proud of his Vietnamese heritage, Quoc, born in Australia after *Tu Do's* arrival, had always lingered on the fringes of his family's story. He listened with rapt attention as Dao recounted her memories of playing on deck, and filmed the three day visit with his own camera. For Quoc, the event encouraged his family to open up

about their experiences for the first time, and gave him some sense of belonging to that story.

The responses of the Lu family to *Tu Do* hint at the resonance the vessel may have for the wider Vietnamese community. Dai Le, an ABC journalist who attended the event, had fled Vietnam on a similar boat as a seven-year-old. Seeing *Tu Do* she admitted, invoked those memories—ones she had deliberately pushed to the back of a busy life.

During the three days *Tu Do* was open for inspection, 800 members of the public clambered onboard. The interactions between the general public and Vietnamese visitors— particularly the Lu family—were both revealing and heartening. Some became quite emotional when they asked to the family about their escape. The Lus were feted like celebrities, with visitors asking to pose with them for photographs on deck. While this experience was somewhat uncomfortable for the family, it was a compelling validation of their journey. The open boat enabled the museum to connect visitors with other cultural groups where previously there had been no ‘meeting’ ground.

Linking communities—challenges and possibilities

Personalising the *Tu Do* story obviously has tremendous potential for engaging general audiences and encouraging them to contemplate the motivations and ordeals of refugees. But how do we package that history?

Resources and safety issues prevent *Tu Do* being permanently open for inspection. Long term, we would like to install weatherproof monitors on the wharf with interactives linked to all our historic vessels. Visitors could listen to oral histories with the Lu family, track their voyage from Vietnam, and embark on a virtual tour of the vessel fitted out with props and provisions.

Once the engine is reinstalled, we would like to take the boat on the harbour. There is scope for audio tours or sound scapes on board, where the public (particularly school children) can scramble below decks and listen to the sound of rice bubbling on a clay stove, hushed Vietnamese voices, and the drone of a diesel engine. There is potential too, for creating a pungent smell scape—of dried fish, cooking oil, and incense burned to pray for a safe passage. We want to employ Vietnamese guides as story tellers to narrate the Lu’s journey, but also to reflect on their own migration stories.

Instilling some sense of ownership in the Vietnamese community is one of the major hurdles faced by the museum. Despite a lengthy invitation list and impressive media coverage, Vietnamese attendance at the relaunch was disappointing. The Vietnamese are not traditionally museum goers and our museum, unlike regional galleries in suburbs such as Fairfield and Liverpool, has only refracted contact with these communities.

There is an entrenched wariness of dealing with government organisations and agencies in refugee communities. The surveillance and censorship Vietnamese endured under the communist regime, also render some hesitant about revisiting, revealing and recording their stories. Refugee voyages were harrowing and many lost family at sea or witnessed horrific events such as drowning, piracy and rape. As Tuyet’s response demonstrated, those memories are often still raw and very immediate. One of our volunteers works with

a Vietnamese woman who glimpsed him copying his guide notes for *Tu Do*. Intrigued, she opened up to him for the first time about her own refugee background. While she attended the relaunch, she simply could not bring herself to board the boat.

Although a remarkably sturdy vessel, *Tu Do* was built to last a single journey. The museum has made the decision to preserve for posterity an object that was fundamentally a means to an end. The image of the Vietnamese refugee boat is an evocative one for other Australians, but is it artefact Vietnamese migrants invest with great significance? Do these communities want to be perennially branded as ‘boat people’ or are there other discourses we should explore?

***Tu Do*—future programs**

There is clearly a need to consult with Vietnamese communities about how they want these stories told in a museum context—whether our programs should commemorate journeys or celebrate Vietnamese survival and achievements. Regional museums such as Casula Powerhouse, located in NSW’s Vietnamese heartland, often develop programs through curatoriums of migrant artists, community representatives and curators. These have produced some extraordinarily well received exhibitions including *Viet Pop* (2002) and *The Fall of Saigon* (2005) examining the shifting identities of second generation migrants through art, film, music and performance. Cuong Le, Casula’s dynamic cultural development officer, is enthusiastic about developing collaborative programs around *Tu Do*. Rather than trying to lure a Vietnamese audience to Darling Harbour, we should perhaps focus on taking the Maritime Museum out into these communities and tapping into established relationships between regional galleries and their migrant audiences. We need to think about collaborating, but also co-hosting exhibitions with regional venues.

Initially we want to develop an oral history program using *Tu Do* as a memory prompt for capturing the ‘freedom stories’ of other Vietnamese. A similar project called *The Boat* was undertaken to great acclaim by Vietnamese artist Dacchi Dang at Sydney’s Gallery 4A in 2001. Recently, a filmmaker for ABC Compass program used *Tu Do* as the backdrop for interviewing fashion designer Alistair Trung, who fled Vietnam with his family when he was eleven. Alistair suggested that just the sound of *Tu Do*’s creaking timbers conjured up vivid memories of his voyage. He wondered how his parents, for whom the escape had been far more traumatic, would respond to the vessel.

Tu Do is one of the few objects in our collection that we actively encourage people to walk on, touch, interpret and use. The boat could provide a dramatic set for a play on Vietnamese journeys and identities. We would like to develop events around *Tu Do*, and to fund initiatives that encourage Vietnamese playwrights, dancers, artists, musicians, and film makers to develop works inspired by the boat. There are exciting possibilities for educational programs targeting schools with large Indochinese and refugee intakes.

Although a national museum, we are prone to parochialism—to targeting easily accessible communities. Currently we are planning a pilot project in the Northern Territory to record the memories and mementos of Darwin Vietnamese, to document the experiences of Australian officials and translators who processed these refugees, and to

explore the impact of the boat people phenomenon on the wider community. The museum will attempt to capture an historical moment – the arrival of Vietnamese boat people - from a multitude of perspectives. The final product might be an interactive, a virtual or a travelling exhibition.

These programs could be linked to websites such as the fledgling Archive of Vietnamese Boat People, which documents material culture, photos and testimonies connected with the global migrations of Vietnamese. The most promising find from the research conducted around *Tu Do* is how timely the restoration of vessel is. The trauma of ocean journeys does seem to be fading and the last five years have witnessed a flurry of oral history projects initiated by the Vietnamese community and facilitated by such innovative academics as Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, Mandy Thomas and Melissa Butcher. First generation Vietnamese seem more willing to revisit their journeys—perhaps as a natural function of time, or perhaps because Indochinese populations are now an integral part of Australia’s cultural fabric.

Concurrently there seems to be intense curiosity in untangling these histories by second generation Vietnamese. Young writer Thao Nguyen suggests that for her generation, stories about war and migration have shaped their life constantly like ‘some transparent intangible fluid that follows your shadows from one life to another’(2). Thao initiated *The Memory Frame* – a writing and photography project which encourages young Vietnamese Australians to delve into their past. Young Vietnamese are already exploring the strange cultural landscape they inhabit through film, art, writing, drama, and music. We need to ensure that the Maritime Museum creates enticing spaces for those explorations so that subsequent generations of Vietnamese see *Tu Do* and this museum as part of their story as well.

Conclusion

The programs outlined in this paper are ones the Maritime Museum is determined to pursue with Vietnamese communities throughout Australia. But *Tu Do*’s story clearly slots into much broader discourses about the island nation, identity and nationhood. Our challenge for the future is using *Tu Do* to cross other borders, and create dialogues with different communities. We need to identify and amplify the historical parallels between the experience of *Tu Do*’s passengers and those of the Chinese who flocked to the New Gold Mountain in the nineteenth century, the thousands of Displaced Persons who escaped Europe after World War II, and recent asylum seekers from Iraq, Afghanistan and West Papua. Separated by years, sometimes centuries, the emotional terrain they navigated as migrants have much in common.

When *Tu Do* was relaunched in 2005, the Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs issued a media release. It celebrated the rich contributions of the Vietnamese to Australian society and Australia’s long, proud record of assisting refugees and displaced people. In this context *Tu Do* had become an historical full stop, conveniently and safely cordoning off Vietnamese boat people into our nation’s past. The museum’s mission is to ensure that a refugee boat called *Freedom* remains a perpetual question mark – a stimulus for trying to understand the motivations for migration, the complexity

of our national identity or identities, and our enduring connections to the idea of an island nation.

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End notes

1. Andrew Jakubowicz *A Quintessential Collision: critical dimensions of the Vietnamese presence in the Australia empire project* Cultures in Collision Colloquium, Transforming Cultures, UTS, May 9, 2003 p.3
2. *The Fall of Saigon: Collected fragments of the post 75 generation* – exhibition catalogue 2005

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