

The Refugee`s Tale

DAN VUONG

In 1979, when the Vietnamese government decided to expel residents of Chinese origin, Dan Vuong and his family were among those who made an arduous escape in a small boat to Hong Kong. A former biology teacher, Dan now works for the Elfrida Rathbone Voluntary Projects Programme. Through his job he is involved in helping other Vietnamese families start a new life in Milton Keynes. But he is also concerned that their children do not grow up ignorant of their past.

My father and mother had a house and a business in Vietnam. But after the country became Communist everything belonged to the government and we had to leave with nothing except small things which were easy to sell. We used the money to pay the boat owner to take us out of Vietnam. It was a sailing boat made out of wood about twenty-five metres long. There were over one hundred and fifty people on board. We were on the boat for two months. There was nowhere to sleep, unless you could sleep sitting down or standing up. We ran into a big storm off the coast of China, it was very dangerous, very frightening. But all the time we were thinking: "We`ve got a new life..."

The Important Thing Is Freedom

Eventually we arrived in Hong Kong, where we lived for nearly two years. During this time we were looking for the country we`d like to go to – we thought about America or Canada or England. I chose England because I think here there is more peace, more freedom, and life is not very hard. But the important thing is freedom. I think in America there is freedom but that also meant freedom to carry a gun. And then there was the war So I chose England.

I`ve been in Milton Keynes just over two years. When I first came to England I lived in a Vietnamese refugee camp near Chichester. The refugees that came to England all lived in camps at first, where they were taught English. I was there for seven or eight months, then the resettlement office asked me where I wanted to go. I had no homeland, no home even, but my sister was already living In Milton Keynes, so I decided to come here. It`s a new city and I liked the idea of starting a new life here.

My first job in Milton Keynes was with the Christian Foundation in Wolverton, working on a Community Programme scheme. My English wasn`t good enough for me to get a teaching job, so I started off as a building worker. I worked there for a year, and gradually my English improved. Then I got a job with the Rathbone VPP. Basically I`m a community worker and an important part of my job is acting as a link between the Vietnamese people in Milton Keynes. There about thirty Vietnamese families here, about two hundred people altogether. Most of them have jobs and

quite a lot of them can't speak English. If they have to go to the health centre or if they have a social problem of money problems from the DHSS, or are looking for a job, I have to go along as an interpreter.

On Sunday afternoon at Inter-Action I help run a Chinese language class, teaching Chinese children. They come to England and find the language quite easy to pick up, but they forget their own language. Some parents can't speak English so the children speak English at home but they don't know how to read it and write it. We have three teachers and the children also learn drawing and painting and how to make things.

I have a wife and two boys, one thirteen, one eleven. They speak English quite well – much better than me. We all came over together from Vietnam. My younger son can't speak Chinese, he's forgotten his own language. After a few years here I think many Chinese children will forget where they came from. I don't think that's a good thing. They must remember why they came here. Some of my friends and I, we have the idea of one day writing the story of why we left Vietnam. We'll try to collect pictures of the day we left and the weeks we lived on the boat. I think it will be good for the children, when they grow up, to read about it and know where they came from. We hope that as a result they'll try hard in their new life.

As you probably know, Chinese people celebrate the new year differently than in England. All over the country, families get together for a celebration and hope for a peaceful and lucky year. In this celebration the dancing dragon is very important. The idea of a dragon is to wake up the Spring and bring luck for the year. Last year, for the first time, we held Chinese new year celebrations in Milton Keynes. So we made a dragon, some friends and I, to use in the parade. We have also used it on a number of occasions to teach the children how the dragon dances. One day I hope there will be a real Vietnamese/Chinese community here, then we shall celebrate the Chinese new year every year.