Vietnamese-Owned Manicure Businesses in Los Angeles

by Craig Trinh-Phat Huynh*

Some 30 percent of the 22,000 nail salons in the United States are owned by Vietnamese Americans; in Los Angeles, the proportion is a staggering 80 percent. And the Vietnamese Americans involved are essentially all women. These figures are remarkable since Vietnamese Americans make up only 0.2 percent of the U.S. population and did not begin entering the country in significant numbers until 1975.[1]

Recent scholarship on small business activities in the United States suggests a significant contribution to the economy by various immigrant and ethnic groups.[2] Most of these studies have focused on immigrants who may have entered for economic reasons. Since 1975, however, about 20 percent of the documented entrants to the United States are political or religious refugees.[3] Many of these refugees came from Southeast Asia as a legacy of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, and their arrival has generated a growing body of literature on socioeconomic adaptation in America.[4] Yet few studies have considered the development of refugee women's entrepreneurial activities.

While feature stories on California Vietnamese and New York Korean manicurists have appeared in newspapers and other popular periodicals, scholarly articles on the topic based on empirical research are lacking.[5] These popular accounts describe Vietnamese refugee manicurists as eagerly embracing and becoming successful in a glamorous profession, yet one cannot help but wonder whether all Vietnamese manicurists regard their profession as appealing or comfortable, and whether this niche of nail salons in mini-malls throughout California suburbs is their idea of the American dream. The women featured in the articles came to the attention of the media because they were perceived as having met all the objective criteria for success. One goal of the ongoing research that forms the basis for this paper is to define more clearly the unique issues and concerns

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faced by these Vietnamese women. The research may yield information to educate refugee service providers and policy makers about any special needs the women might have and to help other women learn from the experiences of these Vietnamese entrepreneurs.

Economic activity among Vietnamese American women as manicurists over the past 20 years raises a number of questions, including the following: (1) How and why do Vietnamese women enter the manicure business? (2) Since Vietnamese refugees are eligible for federally-funded social services, what types of resources and networks are available to assist them in obtaining appropriate training and licensing to work in this type of business? (3) What issues do Vietnamese manicurists face in the workplace? This research project begins to address aspects of these questions.

Background and Methodology

Ten women manicurists working in Los Angeles County nail salons were interviewed between March 1994 and September 1995. Respondents were identified and asked to participate in the study through personal contacts.[6] Most were Vietnamese, but one woman was of Chinese ethnicity born in Vietnam. Their ages ranged from 24 to 55 years of age. Eight of the women (seven married and one divorced) had children ages 3 to 27. The other two women were single and had no children. Three women owned their nail salons; the other seven were salon employees.

Length of U.S. residence varied greatly. Two women arrived in the first refugee wave immediately at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Three women came during the second wave (often referred to as the "boat people's wave") from the late 1970s to the 1980s. The remaining five women came to this country under the Orderly Departure Program[7] that began in the early 1980s.

Discussion

Vietnamese Manicure Business in California

Southern California, Los Angeles and Orange Counties in particular, has become a major center of the manicure industry. It is also home to most beauty schools that train nail technicians and many national and international manufacturers and distributors of nail products. At the same time, the number of professional manicurists in the area has surged, with Vietnamese refugees entering the Los Angeles industry in the late 1970s. From

1984 to 1989, licensed manicurists in Los Angeles County alone increased 50 percent from 9,755 to 15,238, of which Vietnamese Americans comprise approximately 80 percent.

The proliferation of Vietnamese nail salons can be linked to the cosmetology schools in Southern California, which reported an influx of Vietnamese students in the 1980s. At one school, Vietnamese comprised about 40 percent of all students, compared to only 2 percent only ten years before.[8]

The popularity of manicuring schools among the Vietnamese has led to the establishment of a number of cosmetology schools that are managed or directed by Vietnamese Americans. These schools have transformed their programs to meet the specific needs of Vietnamese students, especially those newcomers with very limited English proficiency. Courses are offered in Vietnamese and financial aid is available. The typical cost for training as a manicurist at a beauty school can be $1,200 to $1,500, but government-sponsored job training programs can cover tuition. Finally, while most beauty colleges usually offer a complete professional cosmetology course requiring 1,600 hours of training, these Vietnamese schools offer a more specialized manicuring course with only 350 hours of training. As a result, such schools have successfully enrolled a large number of Vietnamese students in their manicuring classes.

The 350-hour programs are linked to specific licensing requirements, which vary from state to state. California requires a manicure license for nail technicians; New York does not, and presumably, anyone who knows how to give a manicure can be in the business.[9] In California, the applicant must be at least 17 years old and have 350 hours of training in an accredited cosmetology school. The proliferation of Vietnamese manicurists in the state has prompted the California State Board of Cosmetology to offer its licensing exam in Vietnamese, as well as in English and Spanish.

An informal ethnic network has facilitated the growth in the number of Vietnamese manicurists, because prospective students often learn about the availability of financial aid or job training funds from relatives and friends. When the owners of Vietnamese nail salons need additional nail technicians, they can easily find potential employees by word of mouth and from the Vietnamese students in the local beauty schools. Employers can also recruit workers by advertising for manicurists in Vietnamese-language newspapers, radio, and television programs. Help-wanted signs in Vietnamese are commonly displayed in windows of Los Angeles nail salons.

Wages vary and manicurists usually work on 60 percent commission, plus tips. One industry expert says that the average yearly salary for a manicurist is between $20,000 to $24,000.[10] For the more ambitious Vietnamese women who can accumulate a few thousand dollars, nail salon ownership is the way to become entrepreneurs and to increase income.

Although low or no cost technical assistance is available through public and private agencies, respondents in this study did not utilize these resources in establishing their own businesses.[11] Many were not familiar with the social service agencies that could help them set up a manicure business. Instead, the Vietnamese salon owners in the study used personal savings and borrowed funds from family or friends to start their businesses. Though they were aware of bank loans, for a variety of reasons — including, limited English skills, lack of trust, and unfamiliarity with the process — they did not seek bank assistance. Twenty-four-year-old Michelle Le, arrived in the United States in 1990. When she became a professional manicurist in 1994, Le was not aware of the availability of public or private assistance, and by the time she learned about the programs, she erroneously thought that services were available only to the more recently-arrived refugees. On the other hand, 55-year-old Cam Van, who has been a professional manicurist since 1981, knew about the Small Business Administration when she set up her nail salon. She did not ask for assistance, however, because she wanted to be self-reliant. "I was going through a bitter divorce from my husband, who said to me that I could not make it on my own if I left him," she said. "He thought that I would be a welfare mother with three small children. I wanted to prove myself and to show him that I could make my own business without help from anybody."

A quick glance at the West Los Angeles telephone directory suggests that fifty nail salons in the area are owned or operated by Vietnamese Americans. The five city blocks of Westwood Boulevard between Wilshire and Santa Monica Boulevards are home to eight nail salons — six of which are owned and operated by Vietnamese. Restaurants and photocopy services are the only two types of business that outnumber nail salons on this half-mile stretch. While most of the manicure shops have two or three workers, the largest shop in this business district has 10 nail technicians working on the weekends.

Few Vietnamese or other Asian Pacific American customers frequent these Vietnamese-owned manicure businesses, which are located in a variety of ethnic neighborhoods, ranging from mostly white to mostly African American, Latino, or multiethnic. The ethnic background of clients usually

reflects those who reside or work in the salon's surrounding community. Thus, depending on the location, customers for a particular salon may be predominantly African American, Latino, white, or a combination of the three. On Westwood Boulevard, clients are white or Middle-Eastern (reflecting the fact that many of the ethnic businesses in this neighborhood are owned by Middle-Easterners).

Why Vietnamese Women Enter the Manicure Business

To some observers, Vietnamese refugee women may appear to lack many of the resources needed for running a successful business. They don't have investment capital, secure credit histories, U.S. business experience, English proficiency, or knowledge of American culture. In addition, the manicure business can be difficult: it involves long hours, difficult customers, business competition, and risk of robbery and business failure. Given these many disadvantages, why, then, do Vietnamese women enter this occupation?

Shortly after Lani Nguyen, 28, arrived in Los Angeles in 1980, she enrolled in Glendale City College to study English and accounting. She started looking for a job, but nobody hired her. Nguyen attributed this to her limited English skills and her lack of work experience in the United States. Another respondent said that even with good English skills, she would still be at a disadvantage when competing with mainstream workers, because of the level of work skills or cultural experiences needed in the general labor market. She first became interested in manicure after some Vietnamese friends opened nail salons in the city. According to Nguyen, among the many appealing reasons to enter the nail salon business are the following: (1) low capital (about $6,000); (2) easy state licensing process; (3) no requirement for English proficiency; and (4) a very lucrative market. She enrolled in a manicure course at a West Los Angeles beauty school, and after 600 hours of training, she passed the exam and received her state manicurist license. Her first nail business was a rented space inside a hair salon in Glendale. After the owner retired, Nguyen bought the salon and took over the whole shop. She worked there for eight years before moving in 1990 to her current location in the San Fernando Valley.

About half of the respondents started out as seamstresses and learned of the more lucrative manicure business through fellow seamstresses. Forty-six-year-old Jasmine Trinh, a schoolteacher in Vietnam, entered the United States in 1986, and found her first job as a seamstress in a downtown Los Angeles sweatshop. While working there, she heard about Vietnamese

manicure businesses from her co-workers. A year later, Trinh left her sewing job and studied manicure in a local beauty college. She decided to change jobs because she earned such little money in the sweatshop, even though she frequently brought work home so her husband and children could help her sew at night. As a manicurist, Trinh has been able to make four to five times the income of her old sewing job, and she is happy that she no longer has to bring home work to help gain extra income.

Several Vietnamese women became manicurists because they felt that they were at a disadvantage in other jobs that brought them into contact with the public. In addition to more independence, the business also allows the women to limit contact with an unfamiliar culture, and care for their families.

Limiting Contact With an Unfamiliar Culture

Vietnamese refugee women are likely to become manicurists because the salon business provides a high degree of autonomy and insulation from an alien — American — culture, language and people. Ironically, the nature of their work puts them in full contact with non-Vietnamese/non-Asian clients with whom they must communicate in English and be somewhat knowledgeable of American culture. At least, however, they are more in control of the situation.

Family Factors

Vietnamese refugee women often choose the manicure business because it allows them to provide for the needs of family members. To some, this also means making use of family-based resources in a way not possible under other conditions of employment. For many of the women, the manicure business functions as an extension of the family itself, allowing the women to spend more time with their children and saving on childcare expenses. Nguyen explained, "What I like most about my work is that I can take my daughter to the shop and look after her while I work on my customers." In one corner of her nail salon — a mini childcare center — Nguyen has placed a big doll house and lots of toys for her four-year-old.

Problems Faced by Vietnamese Manicurists

Vietnamese manicure businesses face a number of problems. The business has reached a saturation point in many parts of Los Angeles and competition has become fierce. Linda Ly has seen a proliferation of Vietnamese-owned nail salons in the area where she currently works. She is not happy about the intense competition. "[Vietnamese people open] their nail salons

just a couple of doors down the street from yours. Not only that, they lowered their prices and competed for the same customers in the area."

In this competitive market, when some Vietnamese manicurists have lowered their rates to attract customers, others have had to follow suit. In the early 1980s, the price of doing a full set of nails was $60. Today, most Vietnamese nail salons charge their customers only about $18-20 for the same service. Some salons have tried another strategy to bring in new customers: free service to first-time customers. This competitiveness has resulted in some shops being only marginally profitable.

Vietnamese domination of the business and their competitive prices have created resentment among some non-Vietnamese nail salon owners who decry the lowering of prices to just one-third of what they were a decade ago. Many Vietnamese manicurists, however, counter that this trend has simply made nail services more affordable for more customers.

Manicurists also face health risks. Skin infections and danger from toxic chemicals are real threats, as well as the spread of HIV/AIDS. Because their limited English proficiency keeps them from reading and understanding warning labels on nail products, many Vietnamese manicurists encounter problems. For personal health safety reasons, most Vietnamese manicurists now take some precautions, such as wearing masks to protect themselves from dust created when filing nails. Sanitation is a concern for both the customers and the manicurists. All manicurists must meet sanitary standards established by state regulation, and most customers are interested in knowing that the Vietnamese manicurists sterilize their tools properly.

Some manicurists must also work with difficult customers, who give the impression that they look down on the workers, perhaps because of poor English-speaking skills. Sometimes disagreements arise over a customer's failure to provide a gratuity. Often, customers who are unhappy about the service will express their dissatisfaction and ask for some form of compensation from the manicurists. As a result, those Vietnamese manicurists who are limited English speakers or who are less familiar with American culture tend to feel overwhelmed by such demands, sometimes accompanied by strong feelings and language, from customers. While Vietnamese manicurists are afraid of customers who become querulous and hostile, customers can become frustrated and lose patience with the manicurists who may not be able to understand the specifics of their request. This particular perception toward the customers is less common among the Vietnamese manicurists who are more acculturated and who can also speak better English. They are more familiar with customer attitudes and can communicate more effectively to address the problem.

Conclusion

These findings indicate that Vietnamese refugee women chose the manicure business when they realized that their employment opportunities in the United States were limited by a language or education gap. In many instances, the manicure business has provided Vietnamese women with good, successful jobs. If "success" is defined, however, as making millions of dollars, or even hundreds of thousands, Vietnamese manicurists could not be deemed successful. If, on the other hand, "success" means survival and modest growth to the point where many people can earn a decent living by American standards, Vietnamese manicurists are largely successful. This does not mean that all Vietnamese women are able to do this. Certainly more needs to be learned about this phenomenon, but what we know now is that some Vietnamese women have reached a level of self-sufficiency in the United States through the manicure industry.

Footnotes

1 See Shinagawa, Larry Hajime "The Impact of Immigration on the Demography of Asian Pacific Americans," in this volume and Hing (1993).

2 According to the New York-based trade publication *American Salon*, in 1988, 139.9 million manicures, pedicures, and artificial nail services were provided in the United States generating $932 million in business. See Ong, Bonacich and Cheng (1994); Tseng (1994); and Zhou (1992).

3 Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1986. *Report to Congress: Refugee Resettlement Program* (Gold, 1988).

4 See Haines (1987); Finnan (1982); and Bach and Bach (1980).

5 Some attention has been devoted to the proliferation of Vietnamese- and Korean-owned nail salons, such as newspaper feature stories (e.g., "Vietnamese women nail down their niche as manicurists in L.A.," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 June 1989; "Waiting on women hand and foot," *The Orange County Register*, 27 November 1989; "A hand up," *Mirabella*, July 1991.

6 The data is not a random or representative sample of Vietnamese manicure businesses. The women interviewed, however, were diverse in terms of age and length of residence in the United States.

7 The Orderly Departure Program (ODP) helps Vietnamese immigrants reunite with their family members living in the United States.

8 *Los Angeles Times*, 11 June 1989; *The Orange County Register*, 27 November 1989.

9 See Park (1990).

10 Dan Hoang interview, associate publisher of *Saigon Nails* — a Vietnamese-language trade magazine.

11 For a discussion on the U.S. refugee resettlement program and its policy of economic self-sufficiency for refugees, see Bach (1988); and Law and Schneiderman (1992).

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