

Oh, Saigon

Twenty-five years after her family was airlifted out of Vietnam, the filmmaker returns and sets out to uncover her story.



In 2000, as a young Vietnamese-American woman, Doan Hoang began filming interviews with her family in America, and kept the camera rolling as they journeyed back to Vietnam. Doan had been on that last civilian helicopter out of Saigon at the age of 3. In seeking to uncover the mysterious circumstances of her family's schism, Doan has compiled a documentary account that reveals the humanity of those who were soldiers, wives, children, prisoners, revolutionaries, and refugees. The war's deep and lasting ramifications divided this family and many others between two worlds: the cold, "free," and affluent United States, and the colorful, "Communist", and poverty-stricken Vietnam. Their lives demonstrate the consequences of split-second choices, and how a war lives on inside people long after the fighting stops. Yet, we also see indomitable will and spirit of humans and their ability to face adversity, recover and change.



"If I could put my finger on the moment my family fell apart," says the narrator, Doan Hoang, at the beginning of *Oh, Saigon*, "...it would be April 30, 1975, the end of the Vietnam War."



The documentary *Oh, Saigon* is the story of a family torn apart by the Vietnam War attempting to reconcile after decades of separation and political division. In 2000, the narrator Doan seeks to investigate her family's dysfunction, filming her family in America and in Vietnam. Doan and her family were airlifted on the last civilian helicopter out of Saigon. Her sister, Van, had been left behind in the chaos of the war.

Doan's father, Nam, was a South Vietnamese major and pilot while his younger brother, Dzung, deserted the Southern army. Their older brother, Hai, was a Communist who fought against them. Nam is a defeated man living with regret in his quiet, suburban Kentucky home. Hai, Doan's older uncle, lives in bustling, urban Ho Chi Minh City and expresses fiery disapproval of Nam fighting for the "wrong" government and abandoning Vietnam. Dzung, the youngest brother, is a happy-go-lucky but impoverished fisherman living on a breathtaking South China Sea beach. Dzung had been a sergeant for the Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam (ARVN) and shot himself in the hand so he could quit fighting and be with his family. The three brothers exemplify a spectrum of different political beliefs and choices, which affected their futures and their families.



Oh, Saigon also illustrates that war not only affects soldiers and governments, but also women and children. In the chaos of the Fall of Saigon, Doan's family became separated from Doan's sister, Van. Leaving Van behind, they fled to America. Van endured imprisonment in Vietnam and a harrowing escape by boat before a bittersweet reunion with her family six years later. In the Vietnamese community of Westminster, California, Van is a Vietnamese pop singer, outwardly upbeat, but harboring feelings of sadness and angry resentment toward her family for leaving her behind. Doan and Van's imposing mother, Suong, blames Van for what happened to her. Once a well-off Saigon socialite, Suong works as a seamstress serving customers in Kentucky.



Doan has an emotional reunion with her sister, which ultimately leads her to bring her family back to Vietnam for the first time in thirty years to confront their past. Fate is brought full circle in a long-awaited homecoming in the new Saigon.

The main narrator of *Oh, Saigon* is Doan, the connecting link among all the key characters. The narrator lets us into her confidence, revealing her thoughts and showing us her relatives who have been emotionally, physically, and even economically wounded by the war. Because of Doan's closeness with her family, viewers are given intimate access to the film's subjects that only she could obtain. The characters tell Doan, and therefore the viewers, their own stories in their own words, allowing us to see each person's choices and situations as they themselves interpreted them. After the characters are established, their interviews are used as voice-overs. Captured are the characters' raw, natural emotions and reactions to events that unfold in the film. Everyone is shown empathetically, which makes the conflict between the characters, who are related by blood, all the more poignant.



This film explores themes of home, identity, personal choice, patriotism, exile, war, loss, and the love within families that, while difficult at times, spans across politics and national divides. *Oh, Saigon* also deals with the struggle of displacement and how hard it is to maintain a family dynamic while settling in a new country where you are not entirely welcome.

The subjects are shot on location in the expanse of America and its suburbs, as well as Saigon's vibrant, noisy streets, and the rarely-seen breathtaking backwaters of Vietnam – emphasizing the physical differences between two countries that shared a war. Archival footage, moody Super8mm landscapes, and motion-graphics-animated family photographs juxtaposed to clear, colorful DV, shot in a fluid cinema verité-style highlight changes and similarities between past and present. Rarely-seen footage of a peaceful Vietnam, even in wartime, will be shown to highlight that Vietnam was not just a place of war, as it was shown in the news to the rest of the world, but a homeland to its people.



The structure follows two concurrent arcs. The overarching story that we follow is Doan's journey from America, where she was raised, to her birthplace of Vietnam, where she uncovers how deeply the war still impacts her family relationships. Doan meets her Vietnamese relatives, discovers her father's conflict with his siblings, and learns of her estranged sister's traumatic past. Her homecoming to Vietnam and healing draws her to bring her family back to confront their divided past. The second arc is Nam's story, his choices in the war, his separation from his family and country, and his resolution with his brothers. The third and arguably the most powerful story is that of Van, who lives in quiet resentment of her family for abandoning her on the last day of the war to her eventually seeking confrontation to those whose actions drew her into a tragic situation.

In seeking to resolve the obvious schism in her family, Doan has compiled a documentary account that reveals the humanity of those who were soldiers, wives, children, prisoners, revolutionaries, and refugees. The war's deep and lasting ramifications divided this family and many others between two worlds: the cold, "free," and affluent United States, and the colorful, "Communist", and poverty-stricken Vietnam. Their lives demonstrate the consequences of split-second choices, and how a war lives on inside people long after the fighting stops. Yet, we also see indomitable will and spirit of humans and their ability to face adversity, recover and change.



THE CHARACTERS

Nam - A former South Vietnamese pilot living in exile as a self-described "failure" for fleeing his country, Nam laments the events of his life that brought him to Kentucky.

On choices: "I didn't have any other roads to choose. I could have been imprisoned by the Communists. I could have been killed right there. Or I could leave to some foreign land. I thought that if I died, my whole family would be harmed. There was no other way but to take my wife and children out of the country to live in a place, a place that was not our home."

On communism: "As long as there's communism in Vietnam, there's no way I could ever go back."

Doan - Nam's daughter and the film's director and narrator. Nam took Doan out of Saigon on the last day of the war on the last civilian helicopter. She grew up in Kentucky and attempts to piece back her family after the war divided them.

On family relations: "I had a dream in my childhood that returning to Vietnam would bring my family back together. But it was naïve to think that the wounds of war could be undone."

Hai - Nam's older brother, who he had kept secret from his children. As a Communist, Hai fought against Nam in the war. Hai lives in Ho Chi Minh City and expresses fiery disapproval of his brother's choices:

On his brother: "I am a patriot. I've followed communism since I was fifteen... Your dad was a puppet...He abandoned us and has done nothing for this country."

Anne - Nam's wife, a former Saigon socialite turned Kentucky seamstress. Hardworking and tough, Anne has yet to face the events that separated her from her life in Vietnam and from her oldest daughter, Van.

On America and the war: "I'm sad things came out that way, but I had to accept it. I'm sad about the war and about being abandoned by America. If America hadn't abandoned us then none of this would've happened."

Dzung - Nam's younger brother, a fisherman, had been in the South Vietnamese Army and shot himself in the hand to get out of fighting in the war.

On fighting a war: "I didn't have any ideals at all. I didn't think anything about capitalism or communism, but I was still forced to fight. You live under a government, and they make you fight. There's nothing you can do."

Van - Anne's daughter, and narrator Doan's "secret" half-sister. Van was left behind in the chaos of the last day of the war. Van still harbors resentment towards her mother for leaving her behind.

On her mother: "Mom loves me, but she loves herself more than she loves me. She still loves me. She just loves herself more."

"Yes, I'm a good mother. I would never leave Dylan because I was there before. The thing is, I want him."

