



Photo: Elaine Biere

A Chinese Woman Flees Vietnam

Briar Kari

Du, une femme vietnamienne fut obligée de s'enfuir du Sud Vietnam lorsque les Communistes prirent le pouvoir. Elle a aussi beaucoup souffert lorsque des pirates attaquèrent le bateau à bord duquel elle se trouvait dans le golfe de Thaïlande. Après un temps dans un camp de réfugiés, elle est venue au Canada en 1980 avec sa famille. A présent, elle apprend l'anglais avec l'énergie et la détermination qui lui sont coutumières. Elle espère bientôt pouvoir monter de nouveau son propre commerce.

Du (pronounced "Yu") first impresses you as a strong-willed Chinese woman with intense hand gestures and a direct manner. Du, now forty-one, has lived in two widely diverse worlds — she very nearly didn't make it to the second one. Like many of the Vietnamese citizens who fled the Communist takeover, she was attacked by pirates in the Gulf of Thailand. Eight times the little vessel, packed with 320 people in a ninety-two-square-metre space, was overrun by these wild Thai marauders who raped, robbed, and battered the inhabitants. Du, her husband, and six children lost everything but their lives, a few pieces of jewellery she had sewn into the waist of her underpants, and an American bill hidden in a medicine bottle among her clothing. Although all her gold had been taken, she survived the two-week ordeal afloat. Others were less fortunate. Du says they died of fear.

Du and her husband Minh lived in the little town of Bac Lieu, a few miles south of Saigon. They had their own business, selling fishing gear and garden pesticides, and made their home above the shop.

"What did you do when you weren't working?" I asked to get a feeling of people's everyday lives. Du's face softened as she told of the

pleasant life it had been in southern Vietnam before the Americans left in 1975 and the ravaging agents of Ho Chi Minh's successor, Le-Duan, arrived.

A tale laughingly emerged of Du's driving her Honda to the scenic places she loved so well. "Que Huong xinh, xinh, que huong hoa binh," she quoted. "O, my country, my beautiful country." She also spoke of the friendly market place where seven days a week people gathered to eat and speak together while vendors plied their trade from little stalls and mats and young attendants from outdoor restaurants assisted their more well-off patrons. Although most issues were discussed openly, the more volatile aspects of the American presence in Vietnam were not commonly referred to outside the larger cities.

Du's new world, though it does not offer the loved and accustomed things of home, at least offers safety after her perilous journey. The pirate attacks had struck a severe emotional as well as physical blow to the little vessel's inhabitants, and it was with great relief that she and her companions reached the shores of Malaysia. But only more hardship awaited them. The Malaysian navy hooked Du's vessel onto one of their ships and dragged it at breakneck speed far out into the South China Sea, setting it adrift with only two pails of water — for which the refugees were charged \$100 American. It was then that Du spent the money in her medicine bottle.

Good fortune was on Du's side, however, for the boat eventually landed in Indonesia and everyone was taken to a refugee camp. She had escaped the fate of thousands who died from drowning, sharks, heat, lack of food and drink, or at the hands of pirates. After being shunted from camp to camp, Du and

her family lived for a time in a small shack they bought from its former inhabitants. Eventually they travelled by government boat to Malaysia and took a plane to Canada. They arrived in July, 1980.

After two years away from a land whose invaders had forced her to sell out at a loss and who had then confiscated her store; a land where people disappeared into jails, concentration and work camps, some never to return; a land where everyone with a Chinese background was suspect of counter-revolutionary activities, Du has a sense of relief. Although her arrival has occurred at a time of widespread economic depression, which makes it that much harder to integrate with and enjoy a new culture, Du has much to be thankful for. Canada has supplied the air-fare loan that allowed her escape, supported her through the first year with the refugee-assistance program, and has given her a ten-month ESL (English as a second language) learning session. Her children enjoy Canadian schools and the new life and friends they have discovered. Presently Du has a part-time job and is aided by welfare. But since she has six children, there is not much money to go around.

I asked Du if she had thought of training in some skill, if she had some defined goal for the future. Her dream is to own her own business once again. With the dynamic energy and the determination with which she goes about everything, from learning English to maintaining her home and making people feel welcome, it appears that Du will both make the best of her new world and offer much to its diversity. In addition, the outrage she feels at the wrongs done to her people and her beautiful homeland will help people feel the sufferings experienced by innocent people all over the globe.