

Operation Babylift Through Film: Suggestions for Classroom Use of *Precious Cargo* and *Daughter from Danang*

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See also:

- “Teaching *Daughter from Danang*” <http://www.exeas.org/resources/teaching-daughter-from-danang.html>
- “Transnational Adoption: Further Reading for Instructors” <http://www.exeas.org/resources/transnational-adoption.html>

The Films

Daughter from Danang. Directed by Gail DOLGIN and Vincent FRANCO, 2002. 81 minutes. VHS and DVD. Available for purchase from PBS Home Video (VHS: \$19.99, DVD: \$24.99). Available for rent from Netflix.

This moving documentary follows the life of Heidi Bub, a Vietnamese-American woman in search of her birth mother. Adopted by a single mother in Pulaski, Tennessee (birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan), Heidi’s removal from Vietnam to the United States was conducted through Operation Babylift during the last years of the Vietnam War. Now an adult, Heidi returns to Vietnam to meet her birth mother, but discovers much more than the family she left behind.

See also:

- <http://www.exeas.org/films/daughter-from-danang.html>
- www.daughterfromdanang.com (official website)

Precious Cargo. Directed by Janet GARDNER, 2001. 56 minutes. Available for purchase (\$295) and rental (\$75) from Filmmakers Library, <http://www.filmmakers.com/>.

In 1975, in what became known as “Operation Babylift,” the US flew 2,800 mostly mixed race South Vietnamese children who had been living in orphanages to America, where they were adopted. Interspersed with historic footage tracing the events of the latter days of the Vietnam War and presenting conflicting views of the airlift ranging from broadly humanitarian to purely political, *Precious Cargo* follows a small group of

adult adoptees as they travel back to their native country on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Operation Babylift.

See also:

- <http://www.exeas.org/films/precious-cargo.html>
- <http://www.pbs.org/itvs/preciouscargo/index.html>

Student Activities

1. Have students watch all or selected portions of *Daughter from Danang*. Discuss the different realities and expectations of various actors in the story: Heidi, her adoptive mother, her birth mother, her husband, her Vietnamese siblings, the journalist. How did they understand the airlift and subsequent adoption? Choices and possible life chances in Vietnam for Heidi? US motives? Reasons for returning to Vietnam? Expectations for the visit? Relationship after the visit? Role play a discussion about these issues among the different actors.
2. Watch all or selected stories from *Precious Cargo*. Only one of the twelve had had contact with her birth mother prior to the trip to Vietnam, and their relationship was strained. Why? How did the experience of returning to Vietnam change her attitude towards her birth mother? Why?
3. Watch both *Daughter from Danang* and *Precious Cargo*. Imagine the future of several of the Babylift adoptees profiled in *Precious Cargo*. What do you think will happen if/when they locate their relatives? Will it be similar to or different from Heidi's story? Why? (Conversely, what will happen if they never find their relatives?) Role play different scenarios. What would be the ideal scenario? Most likely? Most difficult? If, like Saul, you were working with displaced people, how would you help them deal with their places of origin?
4. One of the issues mentioned in both films is the notion of "difference." All the adoptees talked about having felt different in the US since their childhood, and many felt surprisingly comfortable in Vietnam. Discuss this notion of "difference." How were they constructed as different — Color? Race? Ethnicity? Having adoptive vs. natural parents? What were some of the ways they and their families dealt over the years, at different life stages, with this "difference?" How do you think this visit will change their own sense of themselves? Are cross-cultural/mixed race adoptions a good idea? Attitudes and practices regarding cross-race/cultural adoptions seem to be changing, with many adoption agencies more reluctant than in the recent past to adopt cross culturally/racially. On the other hand, many non-Chinese adoptive parents of children from China are introducing their children (and themselves) to Chinese culture. Do you think this is an important and crucial role for adopted parents to play? What are the benefits? Challenges?

Further Reading and Web Resources

- a. Operation Babylift
- b. Operation Babylift in the Media (1975-1982)
- c. 2005 Adoption Agreement between the US and Vietnam

a. Operation Babylift

American Experience: Daughter from Danang, PBS

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/daughter/peopleevents/e_babylift.html

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/daughter/filmmore/ps.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/daughter/tguide/index.html>

A brief overview of Operation Babylift, a selection of primary sources, and a teacher's guide from the PBS website for *Daughter from Danang*. Primary sources include a House of Representatives debate on the status of Vietnamese orphans and President Gerald Ford's statement immediately following the plane crash of the first group of orphans departing Vietnam.

Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the United States. "Homecoming Brings Babylift Full Circle." 17 June 2005.

<http://www.vietnamembassy.us/news/story.php?d=20050617021613>

A short article on the return visit of several Vietnamese adoptees.

EVANS, Alona E. "Huynh Thi Anh v. Levi. 586 F.2d 625." *American Journal of International Law* 73.3 (1979): 505-508.

Review of a custody case brought by the birth grandmother and uncle of four Babylift adoptees.

Operation Babylift, Precious Cargo, PBS

<http://www.pbs.org/itvs/preciouscargo/babylift.html>

A brief overview of Operation Babylift from the website for the film *Precious Cargo*.

Operation Babylift Photographs, ComeUnity

<http://www.comeunity.com/apv/babylift-photos1.html>

A collection of photos from the April 5, 1975 Pan Am Airlift

PASSMORE, Daryl. "Operation Babylift." *Sunday Mail* (Queensland, Australia) 10 Apr. 2005.

Feature article about Operation Babylift adoptee Indigo Willing, who established the group Adopted Vietnamese International.

PECK-Barnes, Shirley. *The War Cradle*. Denver: Vintage Pressworks, 2000.

Vietnam Operation Babylift, Adopt Vietnam by Allison Martin
<http://www.adoptvietnam.orgadoption/babylift-index.htm>

Includes a collection of personal accounts of participants, adoptees, and their families

b. Operation Babylift in the Media (1975-1982)

“980 In US; ‘Operation Babylift’ Closes Shop.” *Los Angeles Times* 15 Apr. 1975.

ALLMAN, TD. “Our Children of the Vietnam War.” *Chicago Tribune* 28 Aug. 1982.

DOHM, Bernardine. “Of Defeat and Victory.” *New York Times* 18 Apr. 1975.

DONOSKY, Lea. “\$19.7 Million Settlement in ‘Babylift’ Crash Suit.” *Chicago Tribune* 15 Nov. 1984.

GREENE, Bob. “The United States is Still Sure That It Knows Best.” *Los Angeles Times* 11 Apr. 1975.

HICKS, Nancy. “Black Agencies Charge Injustice In Placing of Vietnam Children.” *New York Times* 19 Apr. 1975.

KNIGHT, Michael. “Vietnam ‘Orphans’ Face New Battle.” *New York Times* 26 Sept. 1976.

LIFTON, Betty Jean. “Needed: More Love Than Patience.” *New York Times* 29 Feb. 1976.

“Lockheed Is Sued for \$200 Million In ‘Babylift’ Crash.” *New York Times* 15 June 1975.

MATHEWS, Jay. “Life Is Getting Better for Survivors of ‘Operation Babylift’ Crash.” *Washington Post* 9 Aug. 1982.

“Operation Babylift Arrives in US With 329 Orphans.” *Washington Post* 13 Apr. 1975.

ROBERTSON, Nan. “Vietnamese Adoptees in US Are Settling In.” *New York Times* 4 Jan. 1976.

Television News Archive, Vanderbilt University
<http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/>

A search for “Operation Babylift” yields nine short video clips from CNN, CBS, ABC, and NBC TV news broadcasts, dating from 1975-2005.

TOMASSON, Robert E. “Connecticut Invalidates Adoption of 2 Vietnamese.” *New York Times* 28 Dec. 1980.

“Viet ‘Nightmare’ Recurs; Guardians Lose ‘Orphans’ to Natural Mother.” *Washington Post* 8 Jan. 1976.

ZIGLER, Edward, and Karen ANDERSON. “The Last Victims of the Viet Nam War.” *Chicago Tribune* 2 Dec. 1978.

2005 Adoption Agreement between the US and Vietnam

Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the United States. “Vietnam, US Initial China Adoption Deal.” *Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the United States of America*. 16 June 2005 <http://www.vietnamembassy.us/news/story.php?d=20050616022846>

“United States-Vietnam Agreement on Adoptions.” *American Journal of International Law* 99.4 (2005): 894-895.

WITTENAUER, Cheryl. “Agreement between the US and Vietnam frees adoptions to resume.” *Associated Press Worldstream* 24 June 2005.