

The Treasure of Vietnam

A review of *The Forgotten Ones; A Photographic Documentation of the Last Boat People in the Philippines* by Brian Doan. Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association, publishers, 2004. Available from Internet Bookselling, a community-based organization of artists, poets, journalists, and community activists. \$24.95, \$3.00 postage. Checks and international money orders to this address, or line with your credit card: <http://store.atozproductions.com>

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How many people have escaped on small boats from Communist Vietnam to save their lives and those of their children? How many died in the attempt?

These are two of the questions so often asked to describe the Vietnamese Diaspora of over one million people since April 30, 1975.

As a child in a small village north of Saigon, the photographer and historian Brian Doan thought the Philippine island of Palawan, where Vietnamese boat people were risking their lives to remove themselves from the Communist regime, was “Paradise.” That is because his older brother had successfully escaped there in 1980.

The photographer-historian followed his brother’s path to Palawan in 2004, not in a life-threatening boat (two cousins had not survived their journey) but with sponsorship of people who want the story of the refugees told. Brian Doan has been well-recognized for his scholarship and vision, including a grant from the National (US) Endowment for the Humanities. He emigrated to the United States in 1991 in the H.O. program, and earned a BFA in photography from the University of Colorado.

Brian Doan has not forgotten the last Vietnamese boat people in the Philippines in a place called Vietville, which was intended to be a permanent settlement for refugees who did not qualify for emigration to the United States. The Philippine government was returning those refugees to Vietnam until 1996, when the Catholic Council of Bishops intervened on behalf of the Vietnamese people who were returned against their will and to conditions of reprisal and discrimination. The excellent history that accompanies the photographs tells the story of this “repatriation” of the 1990s from all the refugee camps – Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand.

The degradation went further in Palawan, which the photographer found was not paradise, but hell. Vietville had been built on top of buried mercury wastes. Almost immediately the people became ill, and a large number of birth defects occurred in the population. Being returned to Communist Vietnam, they did not have adequate medical treatment as well as considered pariahs, even imprisoned, because they had escaped from the country in earlier years.

Angry over the situation, and dedicating his life to changing it, Brian Doan began photographing and interviewing residents of Vietville who had no way out. This is where the story of degradation changes. He relates to the people, and they to him, so the dignity of the individual shines through. They trust him, it is in their faces and bodies.

The photographs are all black and white, finely composed in sharp focus. The extreme rectangular format (panoramic) makes the environment an essential part of the portraits. The people work. The people wait.

Hundreds of years ago, the island of Palawan was on the Red River trade route that brought Vietnamese ceramics to the eager world of South Asia and even Europe. According to archaeologist Kerry Nguyen Long, some of this fine indigenous culture from Bat Trang (a very old pottery-making village) has been found in burials of wealthy Filipinos, the goods were so prized. [\[1\]](#)

Brian Doan has found Vietnamese treasure among “the forgotten people.” Rather than flotsam, they are among the Diaspora of the Vietnamese people that began in 1975 with the end of the democratic government of South Vietnam.

This is the first of his projects to document with fine art photography and first-rate historical analysis, the movement of the Vietnamese people around the world for the first time in their history.

[\[1\]](#) Kerry Nguyen Long, “Bat Trang and the Ceramic Trade in Southeast Asian Archipelagos,” in *Bat Trang Ceramics, 14th – 19th Centuries*, 1995.