

Nguồn Gốc; Heritage

In first grade, I asked Mother if I could dye my hair blonde. Tiger eyes pierced through my facade, and she dismissed the idea with a wave of her hand. Enveloping me in her embrace, she kissed the top of my head, a thick bush of ebony, before squeezing me tighter. Perhaps she knew of the inevitable miles that would come in between us, holding onto me one last time before she lost me to the crop tops, freckled skin, and Pepsi-Cola. Though I did not know then, her eyes shone with hues of blue when I insisted on her using my English name rather than my Vietnamese name.

At age nine, I shrugged on the white collared shirt for the first time and found myself at language school, surrounded by peers just as unenthusiastic as I was. For the next six years, I spent each Saturday learning my homeland's language, tracing its characters and reliving its history. Much to my surprise, I found myself growing each week, slowly embracing my heritage as my role at the school became more prominent. What started out as a meager role in a historical skit merged into the flying wisps of a *nón lá*, a cone hat, as I proudly pranced around on stage to traditional music. Just last year, I graduated at the top of my class. I still go to the school, volunteering as a teacher's assistant and traditional dance instructor instead.

When I look at my students, I cannot help but see my youth etched in the edges of their black-brown eyes. I see my mother's fears when they tell me that learning how to spell *nguồn gốc* is useless, when they discreetly play games on their phone as the teacher explains the meaning of an ancient proverb. They complain, lamenting that it makes no sense, for how could a father be a mountain, a mother a bottomless spring. Their naivety reminds me of my wish for blonde hair, and it makes my stomach churn.

After next year, I will be thousands of miles away, studying in college and moving forward with my life. No doubt I will find a job and have kids, representing the epitome of the American dream.

However, I will come back to San Jose, to my language school. And like the teachers who nursed me since I was young, I will continue in their footsteps.

Because while crop tops are fashionable, so is the *áo dài* with its glittering embellishments. While blonde curls glisten in the sun, our midnight locks sing to the moon.

Though my efforts may seem initially small, I hope that my future students, instilled with pride, will go on in their lives with Vietnam in their hearts. Let our stories of noble kings from century-long dynasties continue onwards, *Trung Trắc* and *Trung Nhi* leading the way. Let my mother beam with pride as she caresses my face.

"Hồng," she will call, and I will finally answer back.