



# *Orientalizing Vietnam: The American Cold War, its “Problems” with Refugee Handicraft Artisans, and their Relationship to Barthes’s Mythology*

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## INTRODUCTION

Following the departure of the French and the political division of Vietnam in 1954 and the subsequent founding of the Republic of Vietnam, or South Vietnam, with Ngo Dinh Diem as president in 1955, the United States Operations Mission to Vietnam [USOM] aimed to help the new Southeast Asian nation maintain its political autonomy and establish economic stability as a way to counter its vulnerability to communism. “The United States is proud to be on the side of the effort of the Vietnamese people under President Diem to establish freedom, peace, and the good life,” the U.S. State Department reported in 1956 (Robertson: 973). That same year, Senator John F. Kennedy explained that the Republic of Vietnam held significance as “the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia,” with an “economy [...] essential to the economy of all of Southeast Asia” (Kennedy 1956: 617-618).

Between 1955 and 1961, the American State Department’s International Cooperation Administration [ICA] dedicated more than 700 million dollars to support personnel from the United States government and from the American business and



design worlds in establishing new economic pathways linking the United States and Southeast Asia. Their efforts included working with small industries and craftsmen to raise the quality of Southeast Asian products and locate markets for their work in the region and in the United States. In 1955, a Hoover Commission report criticized American foreign aid for not directly aiding the craftsmen of so-called underdeveloped countries. In response, and in relation to the United Nation's earlier "Handicrafts Marketing Survey" (ECAF 1951), the State Department summoned American industrial designers for help in completing surveys of handicraft in different countries. Russel Wright was one of those called into action. He was a renowned industrial designer voted, in 1952, President of the Association of Industrial Designers. Many Americans knew him as the creator of "The American Way," a popular, mass produced and distributed line of home furnishings. Wright did more than produce vessels and utensils for American tables, counters, and shelves. In 1951 he and his wife Mary published *Guide to Easier Living*, a book that now reads as a pre-Martha Stewart guide for middle class Americans in organizing their homes.

The ICA hired Wright to visit Taiwan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Hong Kong to assess the region's potential to produce handicraft items for American domestic markets as well as report on the possibility of exporting crafts from there to the United States. Wright traveled in the region from November 1955 to February 1956 together with craft expert Ramy Alexander and fashion designer Josette Walker. In Vietnam, Wright and his colleagues observed people making pottery, handloom textiles, needlework, baskets, silk weavings, wood furniture and lacquerware at sites ranging from cooperatives to semi-mechanized factories, schools and refugee camps. Wright latched onto what he termed "The Refugee Problem" (Wright 1956: 96). Following the division of Vietnam in 1954, hundreds of thousands of people had left their homes to migrate from north to south before the border was sealed in May of 1955. According to the State Department they fled the communist Viet Minh, and many did so aided by what the U.S. Navy called Operation Passage to Freedom, and the United States distributed funds to help integrate these refugees (Foreign Operations Administration Mission to Viet-Nam 1955). Consequently, refugees featured as the subjects of the ICA's programs in South Vietnam.

In an unpublished essay summarizing his first trip there, Wright penned, "of all the needs in this area, none is more pressing than that of help to refugees," and he noted that in Vietnam, "our Technical Mission is taking part in the project of resettlement on reclaimed land" (Wright 1957). Wright perceived the refugees' "problem" as multifaceted. Primarily, however, he stressed how their lack of belonging to a new place and nation undermined their ability to get by in everyday life. Wright transposed the situation into the refugees' need for American guidance: "There are between 500,000 and 800,000 refugees in Vietnam eager to work but with little to do" (Wright 1956: 100). The guidance would consist of the United States helping Vietnamese handicraft artisans integrate into transnational economic pathways with North America by making handicrafts for the American middle classes.



Wright submitted a report to the State Department and published an article in *Interiors* magazine entitled "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia" about the possibilities he saw for a successful handicraft export program (1956). Ultimately, he managed the establishment of several handicraft centers in Southeast Asia, mounted trade shows and department store exhibitions of handicraft in the United States, and designed materials for furnishing middle-class American homes that he named after places in Southeast Asia. By 1958, when hopes had dimmed for the success of handicraft exports from Vietnam to America, Wright proposed a "Handicraft Program for Tourism" in Vietnam. He established the "Russel Wright Program Silk Screen Workshop" in Saigon the next year and oversaw its teaching of color, design, and printing.

In addition to writing about them, many of the photographs Wright published in "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia" depicted Vietnamese and Cambodian handicraft artisans in refugee camps, such as this basket maker from the Xom Moi camp south of Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City (Figure 1). As expressed in "Myth Today" (1957) and additional early writings such as "The Photographic Message" (1961) and "Rhetoric of the Image" (1964), Roland Barthes's account of mythology illuminates how in "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia," Orientalist themes and Orientalizing practices rendered the artisans as uncertain signs that required salvage and domestication, or belonging to American political economic ideologies and ways of life.

## ORIENTALISM AND MYTHOLOGY

Before considering "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia" in terms of "mythology," first, it is necessary to frame the discussion in the context of Edward Said's book, *Orientalism* (Said 1978). Then, we will briefly review the significance that Said's work had for the scholarship of photography and American Cold War culture, respectively. Also in question is how Barthes's work intersects with Orientalism.

In the section of *Orientalism* called "Knowing the Oriental," Said outlined ways that throughout the history of European colonialism in the Middle East, and using practices to create and represent knowledge, Europeans constituted their Middle Eastern subjects as "the Orient, the Oriental, and his world" in binary relationships that gave Europeans the greater power, authority and significance (Said 1978: 40). This amounted to Europeans characterizing their civilization and selves as Western, changing, progressive and modern in contrast to Middle Easterners who, they asserted, remained primitive, pre-modern and unchanging.

Nick Crossley reminds us that for Said, "Knowledge and imagination of the East does not arise out of nowhere or out of a neutral intellectual encounter" but from "an encounter which is already political and economic. It arises in a context of material and political domination and is shaped by that context" (Crossley 2005). If we turn from the emphasis Said placed on Europe to consider the United States of the mid twentieth century, and from Middle Easterners to Southeast Asians, it is possible to appreciate



that knowledge about the latter was “regulated first by the local concerns of a specialist, later by the general concerns of a social system of authority” (Said 1978: 45). Said’s reference to a “social system of authority” evokes the political, social and cultural significance attached to Wright’s person and work in and in relation to Southeast Asia. It issued from his connections to the U.S. State Department and its agendas for the region and in relation to the American design, trade and business professionals who were helping to integrate Southeast Asia in a political economic relationship with the United States. Within this “system of authority” Wright encountered and then represented Vietnamese handicraft artisans, including in “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia.”

Also important is what Said referred to as two “principal elements in the relation between East and West. One was a growing systematic knowledge in Europe about the Oriental, knowledge reinforced by the colonial encounter as well as by the widespread interest in the alien and unusual,” to which much literature from travellers active in the region contributed (Said 1978: 39-40). Again, substituting the United States of the 1950s for pre-twentieth century Europe and Southeast Asia for the Middle East, this, too, reminds us of Wright. He experienced Southeast Asia by traveling there to interact with inhabitants and thereby create new knowledge that informed his subsequent reports and articles along with exhibitions of handicraft items he had collected. Moreover, Said continued, another element in the relation between the East and West was Europe’s “position of strength, not to say dominance,” which the West perceived as a relationship between “a strong and a weak partner” (Said 1978: 40). Arguably, as a response to his first trip, in “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia” Wright cast the refugee handicraft artisans he encountered in Vietnam as members of the weak partner, Southeast Asia, which required many forms of American aid. As Crossley noted, “Orientalism is not simply an ‘idea’ of the east. It is a relationship between parts of the world which has both material and ideational aspects” (Crossley 2005).

Numerous scholars and critics have brought Said’s insights about Orientalism to bear on their own projects, including in the history of photography. For example, with “the aim of showing why Orientalism (still) matters when studying representations of otherness today” (Behdad 2010: 710), Ali Behdad considered in what respects Said’s book and his related body of work remain “indispensable for understanding nineteenth-century photography of the Middle East” (ibid.: 711). In particular, Behdad drew attention to the roots of Orientalist networks and practices of photography. In France and England they resulted in images that “froze aesthetically the people and cultures of the region in a static and picturesque tradition” (ibid.: 718). Some of the themes that Behdad identifies also shaped “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia.”

One is that a major world power, in this case, the United States after World War II, aimed to bring a region of the world it perceived as less developed and in need of its assistance – Southeast Asia – into its political economic sphere to help save it. Consequently, the United States sent its representatives to the region to foster economic conditions conducive to establishing and maintaining democracy there.



Russel Wright and his team featured among them, and in recognition of Wright's efforts the American design world considered him an educator and a "designer diplomat" (Fleishman 1956).

Behdad's study of Orientalism especially elucidates aspects of the photograph of Wright appearing in the right bottom corner of the title page for "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia" (Figure 2). For one thing, for the American readership of *Interiors* magazine the photograph represented Wright as an authoritative figure modeling Western, modern practices of travel and knowledge in contrast to ostensibly pre-modern, relatively static Southeast Asian subjects. To this point, Wright embodied "a self-conscious recognition of the home audience, encouraging viewers to image themselves in the place of" him (Behdad 2010: 714). The photograph cast Wright as a middle class professional focused on his work, undistracted by a crowd of children surrounding him. Dressed in a white button down shirt and dark slacks, he knelt to film basket makers in the Lac An refugee camp (Wright 1956: 95). Wright's structured contemporary Western clothing, concentration on operating a movie camera, refusal to be distracted by the children and his age in comparison to them connoted American workaday norms of professional appearance along with training, skill, focus and proficiency if not expertise concomitant to his to government-sponsored agenda, namely, to travel to a place that was foreign to him and most Americans, enter benevolently and stay on task using technology and field observation to gather information about the inhabitants, emphasizing their work skills and environments. Overall, the photograph summons Said's comments about "flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (Said, 2003: 8). For American viewers of the photograph, in contrast to the children who formed a backdrop to his activity Wright appeared older, stronger and more capable of controlling any resistance that would come either from the children or from the Vietnamese people as a whole, which the children likely allegorized. As Said observed, "The scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader, or the soldier was in, or thought about, the Orient because he could be there, or could think about it, with very little resistance on the Orient's part" (Said, 2003: 8).

The absence of signs of conflict or other types of opposition to Wright's presence in the refugee camp also informed how the photograph of the refugee basket maker appearing on the previous page (Figure 1) related to Wright's photograph (Figure 2). Together, the two photographs narrated a surveyor and his subject interrelating provisionally from their different spaces in the magazine, which connoted their very different ways of being. For example, as the surveyor, Wright looked, observed, recorded and knew by acting upon his refugee artisan subject who, eyes downcast, sat quietly in a corner weaving baskets, seemingly composed for study by Wright. Presumably like Wright's activity in the refugee camp, American readers of *Interiors* magazine could examine the basket maker without encountering resistance either. And, displayed as the first page of "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia" (Figure 1) and within the title page (Figure 2), the photographs of the basket maker and Wright served as a



gateway of sorts, as Haldrup, Koefoed and Simonsen put it, with their “contrasting images and the mental boundaries demarcating ‘us’ from ‘them’” (Haldrup, Koefoed and Simonsen 2006: 176) and giving rise to “everyday narratives” of Orientalism such as Western traveller, manager and filmmaker and Southeast Asian refugee that “spread and penetrated into central discussions on the future of the nation-state” (ibid.: 176), namely, the Republic of Vietnam in the context of American foreign relations. Conducted by these themes, the resonance of Orientalism in “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia” made it not “a marginal but a central language in the public debate on the future of Western societies and identity” (ibid.: 176) being advanced by American Cold War interests, policies and activities in Southeast Asia.

The movie camera in Wright’s hand deserves attention. It defined Wright as a Westerner who used technology to facilitate the creation of knowledge about parts of the world unfamiliar to Americans that Americans nevertheless tended to conclude was less-technologically advanced, for example, in regard to handicraft. The themes remind us of the foreignness that Morris (2009) gleaned in the writing and photography of John Thomson, one of “the peripatetic photographers whose images of Siam, Cambodia, Vietnam, Penang, Singapore, and China would inaugurate so many of the conventions by which Asia would be represented to and for Europeans” (Morris 2009: 1). Morris theorized,

Foreignness as it emerges in Thomson’s account of his photographic journeys in Asia is not a property of Asians or of Asians as seen by Europeans, or even of Europeans as seen by Asians in Asia, so much as the structure of a relation between Asia and Europe and within Asia itself: one that marks and figures the experience of a new, technologically mediated historical consciousness and a new experience of history as the name of a mutually othering relation between the bearers of technology and their others (Morris 2009: 8).

In “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia,” additional Orientalist themes promoted by the photographs and text included representing subjects not as contemporary people or culture (Behdad 2010: 714), rather, in need of “intervention for historical preservation and cultural renewal” (ibid.: 715), in some respects, to stave their becoming “a deteriorated and decadent civilization” (ibid.: 715). Another involved Wright’s manner of putting refugees “on public display” in *Interiors* in ways that “negotiated distinctions between the ‘domestic’ and the ‘exotic,’” as Bowd and Clayton (Bowd and Clayton 2005: 303) described about the 1931 Exposition Coloniale Internationale in Paris. In part, the exposition reiterated France’s colonial interests by way of its representations of Southeast Asia which, according to Bowd and Clayton, “brought to a head the vexed imperial question of whether France should civilize its colonial subjects through a process of ‘assimilation’...or pursue a policy of ‘association’ that kept the colonies in a subordinate position to France” (ibid.: 304). Less than twenty-five years later, “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia” promoted associations between the United States and Vietnamese handicraft artisans who by then were post-colonial refugees.



American scholars of history and culture shifted the focus of Said's Orientalist scholarship from Europe before the twentieth century to the United States during the mid-twentieth century. Little (2002) showed "how orientalism made its way into U.S. popular culture" chiefly through "images of the Middle East and other parts of the Third World" that circulated in National Geographic (Little 2002:10). Klein (2003) moved the geography and subjects of Orientalism from the Middle East to Asia, when "the Cold War made Asia important to the United States in ways that it had not been before" (Klein, 2003: 5). In *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*, she explained that during this "distinct cultural moment" American cultural producers created "stories, fiction and nonfiction that took Asia and the Pacific as their subject matter" (ibid.: 2) from the perspective of a "dual concept of integration – international and domestic" as well as integration "that imagined the forging of bonds between Asians and Americans both at home and abroad" (ibid.: 16).

While Wright integrated the U.S. State Department's agendas for diplomacy and programs internationally with America's domestic economy and middle classes, his purview, approach and attitude distinguished some of his efforts from the material Klein studied and the conclusions she reached. Geographically, Klein looked at Asia as a whole, beginning chronologically with "the end of the Pacific war in 1945" and concluding when it "began to narrow down" including to Vietnam (Klein 2003 :5-6). In comparison, "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia" focused on the geopolitical region the State Department described as Southeast Asia. In addition, it showed that politically and, increasingly, culturally, Vietnam had interested American policy makers, culturalists, business and consumers since at least 1954. Klein examined how "middlebrow intellectuals, texts, and institutions tried to educate Americans about their evolving relationships with Asia, and how they created opportunities...for their audiences to participate in the forging of these relationships" (ibid.:7 ). While we may perceive Wright's article as a means to educate Americans, along with the Vietnamese handicraft items and artisans it discussed, "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia" developed squarely within a framework of political economic diplomacy and it directly manifested points of view published by U.S. government officials in Department of State Bulletins. In contrast, Klein studied works of culture that did not originate in American government-sponsored programs.

Perhaps the greatest difference between Wright's article and the Orientalist culture Klein studied involved what, as an example of middlebrow culture, "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia" conveyed about American-Asian relationships. Klein stated that "middlebrow intellectuals repudiated imperialism as an acceptable model for East-West relations. Instead, they produced what Mary Louise Pratt has called 'narratives of anti-conquest,' which legitimated U.S. expansion while denying its coercive or imperial nature". Furthermore, according to Klein, they were characterized by "U.S. global expansion as taking place within a system of reciprocity. In their view, America did not pursue its naked self-interest through the coercion and the subjugation of others, but engaged in exchanges that benefited all parties" (ibid.: 13). Wright did not propose coercion, and although he did speak to mutual benefits to Americans and Vietnamese



interacting through the handicraft programs, in “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia” he maintained Orientalist themes such as Western superiority and Eastern inferiority (ibid.: 11).

Roland Barthes plumbed these by intersecting myth and mythology with Orientalist tropes of the colonial other and East. Furthermore, as Knight observed, Barthes’s “greatest charge against French myths of the day” was “the complete denial of history” (Knight 1993: 621). In what follows, Barthes’s early work makes two contributions to my analysis of “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia” and related texts written by Wright and American government officials, respectively. It underscores Orientalism in their representations of Vietnamese handicraft artisans, and it elucidates how their mythologizing brought forth Orientalist binary relationships constituting the artisans’ loss of contexts, need for saving and salvage by the United States.

#### UNCERTAIN SIGNS

Between 1954 and 1956, as Barthes wrote the essays he would publish a year later under the title of *Mythologies*, perhaps it was not only centuries of French activity in *Indochine* then ending but also the coterminous American “colonization” of consumer markets and desires in France that motivated him to perceive visual and textual signs in discourses of colonialism as impoverishment - “When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains” (Barthes 1957: 117), theft - “myth is speech stolen and restored” (ibid.: 125) servitude - “myth “is a kind of ideal servant: it prepares all things, brings them, lays them out, the master arrives, it silently disappears: all that is left for one to do is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from” (ibid.: 151) and imperialism - “robbery by colonization” (ibid.: 132). Barthes’ attention to the ways power operating in social and cultural contexts can redirect the meaning of images and texts such that they lose apparent connections to origins, histories and belonging especially clarifies the Orientalizing that occurred in Wright’s essay.

Foremost, photographs in “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia” (Figure 1, 3) mythologized refugee handicraft artisans by losing their “contingencies,” specifically, their migration south and subsequent existence in refugee camps. This becomes apparent when we compare the photographs in Wright’s article with others published in the American mass print media. During the early 1950s, the American mass media adopted standard ways to show Asian refugees fleeing communism. For example, in “Korea’s Refugees - Misery on the March” (Samuels 1951: 156), American photojournalist Gertrude Samuels depicted crowds carrying belongings and children as they trudged from north to south. During 1955, she published her similar photograph of refugees moving south through Vietnam as “a human tide” (Samuels 1955). The face of one mother with an infant on her back testified to hardship. Below, a





map outlined her extensive journey along the China Sea coast (Figure 4). Samuels also photographed Vietnamese people crowding onto a U.S. Navy vessel. Between the late summer and early fall of 1954, the "Passage to Freedom" program shipped nearly 5,000 refugees a day from Haiphong in the north to Saigon in the south. Another typical image of the refugees showed them packed into locally made boats that seemed too small and fragile.

In contrast, none of the photographs in "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia" portrayed the migration of the article's subjects or alluded to their potential for mobility. Nor did they describe the overcrowded, chaotic conditions in the refugee camps, as the American mass print media was doing in text and picture (Figure 5). Furthermore, they elided the plight of the refugees, thus taking a very different approach from Tom Dooley's book, *Deliver Us from Evil, The Story of Viet Nam's Flight to Freedom* (Dooley 1956), published in the same year as Wright's article. Dooley, a physician, enlisted with the U.S. Navy and served on the U.S.S. Montague when it evacuated Vietnamese from Haiphong to Saigon. In his book he published many photographs of female evacuees as well as women who remained in the north as victims bereft of husbands who were left to care for children in uncertain conditions. The expressions on their faces and direct gazes at the camera implored readers to witness their raw surroundings and broken families. In this respect, they connoted the tremendous human suffering of the resettlement process, here, summarized by the United States Foreign Operations Administration Mission to Viet-Nam.

The problem of refugees is not new to Viet-nam. During 8 long years of strife, war-displaced families had clogged the roads, overflowed the cities. These were hopeless, helpless people driven from their homes by gunfire or by Communist terrorism. The Vietnamese National Government, with the help of American aid, had fed them, clothed them, built resettlement villages for them. But with the cease-fire, facilities already operating at capacity were further swamped by new hundreds of thousands of people. The problem of this mass movement fell upon a country already exhausted and disorganized by war, a government only 2 weeks in office (United States Foreign Operations Administration Mission to Viet-Nam 1955: 222).

(Figure 1, 3) Although captions in "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia" designated the subjects of its photographs as Vietnamese or Cambodian, and in the text Wright identified a few specific camps, on the whole, Wright did not provide evidence of the refugees' plight or elaborate on the poor quality of their living conditions. Also unlike the mass print media and Dooley's book, Wright depicted refugees alone, without family members or community. Besides individuals in the process of making crafts, Wright showed no culture, such as language or other forms of communication.

Said explained about nineteenth century writer Gustave Flaubert's "encounter with an Egyptian courtesan" that Flaubert "spoke for and represented her"; "she never spoke for herself, she never represented her emotions, presence or history." Said considered this "not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative



strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled" (Said 2003: 7). Similarly, Wright represented neither his subjects' histories nor their emotions. Instead, for example, the photographs he published composed refugee artisans in ways that seemed to favor American readers' interests in their person and craft and not much else. Thus, the refugee basket maker (Figure 1) was arranged to be seen at work - alone, eyes downcast, absorbed in work, seated on the ground, stationary in a corner. In this respect, Wright's photographs contrasted with the congested camp scenes published elsewhere (Figure 5).

They accomplished the additional work of de-politicizing their subjects (Barthes 1957: 142). Put another way, in *Interiors*, Wright related his encounter with Vietnamese people in refugee camps as deserving "widespread interest in the alien and unusual" (Said 1978: 39-40), by carefully controlling what elements signified as alien and unusual. Specifically, photographs and text emphasized handicraft materials, processes and results while disconnecting the artisans from warfare and political conflict such as their national and community histories of colonial war with France, current civil war, the "coeval" history they shared with Americans visiting Southeast Asia and the fracturing of their ties with family and community during migration. Moreover, the loss of situations and events that would have contextualized the refugees historically, geographically and politically fostered the notion that they existed in a place and time that differed from the modern West. This in itself went a long way in signifying them as "alien and unusual" in the West.

Not unlike what Morris (2009) observed about photography in nineteenth century British discourses of foreignness, "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia" also marked "the point of separation between two very different orientations to time" that opened "between an orientation to the past as that which is cut off from its own future, and an orientation to the future as the ideal form of the past" (Morris 2009: 9). In this way, it delimited its subjects as present in an essential "form of the past," in other words, in a manner that "views the Orient as something whose existence is not only displayed but has remained fixed in time and place for the West" (Said, 2003: 109). Barthes expressed similar ideas about a loss of context within uneven power relationships. "When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains" (Barthes 1957: 117).

So visually represented, the refugees in "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia" amounted to uncertain signs. According to Barthes "in every society various techniques are developed intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs" (Barthes 1964: 39). The terror encompassed how to strategize and then realize a future for these homeless people lacking honest work. As the Foreign Operations Administration Mission to Viet-Nam, Saigon reported, "The shooting war has stopped but the future is still far from secure. From now on the big problem will be the integration of the evacuees" (Foreign Operations Administration Mission to Viet-Nam 1954: 228). The American government and mass media also tied



questions about the refugees' future to the freedom of their nation, anti-communism and the Free World.

The future of the refugees who fled from communism depends to a large extent on whether South Viet Nam can stay free. And, conversely, how well the refugee problem is handled will, in turn, be an important factor in deciding the future of South Viet Nam. These 700,000 refugees, who surely proved that they are powerfully anti-Communist, are among the staunchest friends the Free World has in Asia (Samuels 1955: 874).

Principally, "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia" responded by capitalizing on the refugees' mythologized, or Orientalized status. Barthes explained, "In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible" (Barthes 1957: 143). In order to go forward, Wright tried several strategies. Arguably, meaning that was drained purposely from some of the images of refugee artisans strengthened Wright's summons for Americans to support the handicraft aid program. In the photograph facing the title page (Figure 1), the slender, partially unclothed artisan did not clearly signify as male or female. Instead, the figure's androgyny usefully deflected American anxiety regarding whether refugee artisans would or could take up typically masculine gendered fighting roles if they chose to turn away from the democracy of South Vietnam to embrace communism. In this respect, "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia" composed as well as contained the identity of its refugee subjects and practiced a variation of what Haldrup, Koefoed and Simonsen called "practical orientalism, articulated through processes of 'othering' developed and enacted in concrete bodily meetings in everyday life" (Haldrup, Koefoed and Simonsen 2006: 174), say, between Wright and refugee artisans meeting in Vietnam and, subsequently, as Americans encountered their artisans' images in a magazine and reflected on their significance.

Furthermore, Wright cast the refugees as an essentialist, pre-modern, ahistorical, undeveloped, non-technological "Orient, the Oriental, and his world," which he contended their handicraft indexed (Said 1978: 40). This, Wright linked directly to the desires of the American middle classes: "We want handmade products from foreign countries but we want them to have the character and the personality of the particular foreign country from which they come" (Wright 1960). Fortunately for Americans Wright concluded, "the great numbers of skilled handicraftsmen of the Far East can supply a goodly amount of the vast and increasing and eternal need for handicraft products" (Wright 1958). Wright demonstrated his authority to determine what alterations could be allowed in regard to handicraft products: "it is necessary that such products be designed for a world of which the Asian handicraftsman has little knowledge of understanding" (Wright 1960).



## POLITICS OF SALVAGE

So “mythologized,” the handicraft artisans whom Wright associated with “The Refugee Problem” he also salvaged in an Orientalist manner, which according to Said, involved a relationship “between a strong and a weak partner” (Said 1978: 140). My definition of a “salvage paradigm” comes from anthropologist Virginia Dominguez.

We assert the need to salvage, rescue, save, [and] preserve a series of objects or forms, we announce our fear of [their] destruction, our inability to trust others to take appropriate action and our sense of entitlement over the fate of the objects. Our best liberal intentions do little other than patronize those slated for cultural salvage (Dominguez 1987: 131)

And, I would add, political economic salvage, with culture serving as a means to achieve this.

In *Interiors* Wright described the refugees as “millions of willing but helpless Southeast Asians who, cut off from their past, look to the United States for a road to the future” (Wright 1956: 95). “Road to the future” recalled the U.S. Navy using the word “passage” to reference the means of access it provided people evacuating to south Vietnam. The phrase also suggested progressing towards a destination. Importantly, it implied that American aid could shepherd Vietnam into the territory of the Free World. Furthermore, it pointed to the role Wright played as an authority in Southeast Asia who created and then shared knowledge about the region and its inhabitants in ways that Orientalized them within “the general concerns of a social system of authority” (Said, 1978: 45). Wright’s approach to salvaging Vietnamese handicraft artisans also meant associating them with discourses of domestic American life by emphasizing not simply their need for rescue but also their status in relationships of similarity and difference with Americans, as framed by Orientalist binaries. America and Asia, West and East and modern and primitive underpinned Wright connecting the work of the Southeast Asian craftsman to the desires of the American middle classes. Ostensibly, the American side had more power, greater development and in many respects, better quality and taste. The Asian, Eastern, primitive side signified people who were less knowledgeable and enlightened than Americans and who lived more in relation to tradition rather than progress and development, including modernity and contemporaneity. Also, they were more dutiful if not compliant in serving others with something exotic. Knight said that Barthes had circled these themes “either by recourse to exoticism, reducing the other to the status of object, clown, or Punch and Judy show, or through identification” and in this way he diffused “the threat of the other as a pure reflection of the West” (Wright 1993: 621). In regard to Western strategies of characterizing Southeast Asians as both exotic objects and non-threatening reflections of the West, Trinh T. Minh-Ha explained that “‘western’ and ‘nonwestern’ must be understood not merely in terms of oppositions



and separations but rather in terms of differences. This implies a constant to-and-fro movement between the same and the other” (Minh-Ha 1987)

We can detect these nuances in some pathways of salvage that “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia” projected. To this end, it is instructive to compare the first photograph in the article (Figure 1) with a photograph appearing on the far right side of a page in another publication that Wright was not involved with, *The Resettlement of the Refugees of North Viet-Nam* (Pham-Ngoc-Chi 1955: 11) (Figure 6). Both depict one unnamed refugee making baskets having similar patterns. Each sits on the ground in a sheltered place that is neither wholly indoors or outdoors. However, the latter photograph drenches the basket maker in light and places him in the middle of a space filled with materials and finished items. Although he serves as the focus, the organization of the photograph pushes him into the middle ground, which makes it difficult to grasp exactly what he is doing or precisely identify the materials he uses. The photograph is one of three interspersed with text on a page dedicated to the social resettlement of refugees in a traditional social economy, namely, cooperatives, hence its caption, “Basket-making cooperative” (Pham-Ngoc-Chi 1955: 8). Elsewhere in the same booklet the author outlined the Vietnamese government’s priorities and resources for refugees.

[...] the first problem is to help them earn their living and become self-sufficient. The Refugee commissariat, American and French Aid, and especially Catholic Relief Services – NCWC, sought to find their means of work and to encourage craftsmanship. There have been created up to the present time 328 artisan centers and 98 cooperatives of all sorts: 545 cooperatives are in formation. We hope that with the development of the cooperatives and craftsmanship the standard of living of our refugees may be raised and their future assured. All these positive results have been obtained thanks to the interest of President Ngo-Dinh-diem in the refugees. In fact it was subsequent to the appeal of the Chief of the Vietnamese Government that friendly nations came to the assistance of the refugees. The president created the Commissariat for Refugees with the exclusive task of looking after them. (Pham-Ngoc-Chi 1955: 10)

In contrast, having elided references to community or belonging to family or nation, in “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia” Wright treated his refugee subjects as an “uncertain sign” (Barthes 1964: 39) symbolizing “helpless Southeast Asians” who were “cut off from their past” and therefore required salvage (Wright 1956: 95). Their detachment from social contexts in combination with American anxiety and fear about their vulnerability to communism and the deleterious impact this could have on America’s conception of the free world corresponds to Barthes account of a society’s obligation to fix “the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs” (Barthes 1964: 39). In “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia,” Wright accomplished this by situating the refugees in relation to American society and thereby reassuring Americans that something made them relevant if not recognizable and even familiar (Barthes 1961: 210).



Discourses of work and craft expedited Wright's task. The first photograph in Wright's article (Figure 1) depicted the refugee as a focused, successful worker. It indicated that he or she could produce work of a high quality and generate an impressive quantity of baskets. Their number and arrangement implied organization and productivity. These details supported the article's use of the phrase "gold mine" to represent refugees in ways that interested Wright's intended readers, such as American designers, entrepreneurs, tradesmen, manufacturers and distributors who would "mine" the refugees as a valuable resource for creating products for the American middle classes. Therefore, to his readers Wright acknowledged, "Vietnam, where I expected to find little or nothing to export...is bursting with opportunities for the American importer or developer who goes there with designs and merchandising know-how" (Wright 1956: 100). Elsewhere in "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia" Wright published photographs featuring many handicraft artisans (Figure 3) to display a range of craft specializations. The overarching caption reads, "With guidance, these skilled hands can serve the decorative trades and enable designers to carry out developmental experiments" (Wright 1956: 98-99).

Wright marketed his subjects as opportunity and labor for American design, business, and trade in response to what he observed in Southeast Asia— "one has only to see the refugee slums elsewhere in Hong Kong, and the even sadder Vietnam camps, to realize how much remains to be done – among other things to provide employment in crafts and small industries" (Wright 1956: 97). In doing so, he advanced the interests of the U.S. State Department, here, as if expressed directly to President Diem.

The tragic figure in your country's first period of independence...was the refugee, symbol of your nation's defiance of communism. It has been the responsibility of my [American aid] Division...to assist your government in the housing and feeding of over 600,000 persons from North Vietnam and to plan their resettlement into permanent areas. The step which is now absorbing our attention is to supply these new citizens with a means of livelihood. (USOM 1956)

Still, "a constant to-and-fro movement between the same and the other" (Minh-Ha 1987) arose in the ways Wright reassured Americans of the artisans' potential to address American needs and thereby integrate into their domestic economy and lives. Mainly, this consisted of Wright associating Southeast Asian handicraft with mainstream American interests while also subordinating the refugee artisans to American if not Western hegemonies.

For one thing, Wright reiterated a United Nations and American federal government and State Department-oriented horizon of interest in the refugees. The idea that they required American guidance arose in the U.N. Economic and Social Council report about ten Asian nations' readiness and potential to export handicrafts to the United States, where "a great demand exists for goods in the house furnishing line" caused by record home construction following World War II. The report stated



that in Indochina, including Phnom-Penh, Saigon and Biên Hòa, handicraft arts were “very highly developed” and training facilities, excellent. Nevertheless, it identified financial disincentives for Americans exporting handicraft from Indochina along with the “poor quality” of handicrafts and “lack of standardization.” Also, it cautioned Asian handicraft exporters not to expect that Americans “will like or want the same things which local markets prefer.” Instead, it recommended that exporters ensure their handicrafts had been styled “for the [American] buyer’s taste,” and it urged participating nations “[to] study the American market requirements and to be prepared to shift production to those items in demand” (ECAF 1951).

In addition, Wright distinguished between American and Southeast Asian qualities of life and culture.

We cannot hope to provide Asians with American houses, kitchens, bathrooms, or appliances...But it should not be impossible to teach them....they are more likely to improve their condition within their actual potentialities, rather than concentrating on an unhappy, piece-meal imitation of the United States. (Wright 1956: 96)

By using the phrase “within their actual potentialities,” Wright promoted Vietnamese culture as lesser in quality than the way of life that the American middle classes enjoyed. To this point, Wright’s reference to imitation as something that could make Southeast Asians unhappy is interesting. It illuminated his anxiety that having lost their homes and land, refugee craftsmen could lose their proclivity for the hand labor and craft materials that he considered indigenous to them. This was a problem because Wright defined the artisans in terms of their ostensible Southeast Asian-ness and feared it would become hybrid at best and inauthentic at worst if the artisans came into contact with contemporary Western modes of production. Therefore, to remain authentic, he said the artisans’ practices had to remain faithful to those from their past. Otherwise, the type of experience Wright reported about his travels would arise: “I saw centuries-old houses where ‘best-rooms’ were furnished with imitations of American borax furniture of unequalled vulgarity; horrible machine-made parts in Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Bangkok [...] I had to hunt for remnants of the past (Wright 1956: 96).

In this set of examples Wright maintained a trajectory of Orientalism “premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak” (Said, 2003: 22). As an outsider, Wright portrayed Southeast Asians as disengaged from their present circumstances, existing outside of Western notions of history and contemporaneity and deficient in their lifestyle. Nonetheless, he insisted that the refugee artisans tap into a timeless handicraft tradition that he considered a defining feature of their identity. This, he implied, would enable them to purposefully contribute to the modern industrialized West. Accordingly, the West would benefit when the refugee artisan realized “that goods created by his own hands are not only useful to him but maybe of economic value in the industrialized world as well” (Wright



1961). And, from a Western perspective, Vietnam would profit. "Instead of becoming the helpless victim of industrialization, village crafts, revitalized, could play a minor, perhaps, but active part in a new kind of over-all development" (Wright 1956: 96).

As Klein wrote about American Cold War Orientalists, the bonds Wright proposed "between Asians and Americans both at home and abroad" (Klein 2003: 16) required that Americans ideate, decide and model what Vietnamese handicraft artisans should do. In large measure, this meant the artisans would respond to Americans' circumstances: "in our world in the West, the predominance of machine-made products simultaneously (sic) creates an emotional need for objects which, in design and execution, express individual, human creativity" (Wright 1961). In a letter he wrote to Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., the United States Representative to the United Nations, Wright argued that what Americans desired emerged from their industrial and cultural advancement. "There are statistics to prove that this need for the old and the handmade grows right along with the new, machine-made products" (Wright 1961). Unfortunately, as Steinmetz and Rice told in their book, *Vanishing Crafts and their Craftsmen* (1959), in America, although any occupation which gives a worker a chance to earn his way, produce a wanted commodity, keep alive traditional skills, and maintain self-reliance and personal dignity, deserves preservation", nevertheless, traditional crafts were disappearing (Steinmetz and Rice 1959: 8-9). Be that as it may, Wright did not stress the self-reliance or personal dignity of Southeast Asian artisans. Nor did he consider whether they produced artefacts worthy of being considered modern. To be sure, he framed the guidance Americans would give them in the spirit of amity. "If we can help them to redesign and restyle their handicrafts for the United States market, improve their efficiency and stimulate private investment in this vast field, I think we will have accomplished a master stroke for American-Asian friendship and trade" (Wright in Roe 1956: 41). However, in Orientalist fashion Wright largely accentuated the refugee artisans' inferiority, thus implying a balance of authority and power favoring the United States even when it came to defining what counted as Southeast Asian handicraft. "The best way we evolved to have the Asian small producer make things that Americans would want to buy was to have Americans design the products." Instead of "poor copies of Western goods that have no place in their life," he said "native designers must learn the demands of the U.S. consumer" and designers will "train them to our standards of production" so "we can get people who have never seen American life to create things that Americans may buy" (Wright 1961). Wright allowed, "Culturally, we must help them to find and evolve their own kind of 20th century customs and expressions." Still, he concluded by mentioning the artisans' "adaption to our times" (Wright 1958). By claiming the ability to define if not possess modern Western American time as a standard to which the refugee artisans should conform, Wright validated Said's assertion: "that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient" (Said, 2003: 23).





## CONCLUSION

My objection to what I have called Orientalism is not that it is just the antiquarian study of Oriental languages, societies, and peoples, but that as a system of thought it approaches a heterogeneous, dynamic, and complex human reality from an uncritically essentialist standpoint; this suggests both an enduring Oriental reality and an opposing but no less enduring Western essence, which observes the Orient from afar and, so to speak, from above (Said 2003: 334).

In conclusion I want to briefly revisit a photograph from “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia” that portrays two women weaving mats (Figure 7). By observing its significance for other publications we can further appreciate the Orientalizing nature of Wright’s article and move towards retrospectively returning “heterogeneous, dynamic, and complex human reality” to Vietnam during the period when the American handicraft aid program was active there.

In Wright’s article, the photograph’s caption pointed to hardship and a lack of opportunity: “Refugees in a Vietnam camp, weaving mats. There are between 500,000 and 800,000 refugees in Vietnam eager to work but with little to do” (Wright 1956: 100). The year after Wright published “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia,” the same photograph illustrated the theme of “Traditional Cottage Industry” in *A Glimpse of Viet Nam*, a book the Republic of Vietnam published for English-language readers (Figure 8) (Gregory et al 1957: 51). The book explained that in Vietnam, this example of “traditional industry” flourished alongside machine-based industries.

The traditional industries are being carried on in the homes of the peasants and supply the local needs for clothing, implements, some basic building materials and many household items. The crafts are usually pursued in the off-seasons for rice growing, during the leisure time of the peasants” (Gregory et al 1957: 51).

Not only did the reference to handicraft happening at home confuse Wright’s message about Vietnamese handicraft artisans lacking homes as well as direction. Additionally, by implying that Vietnam was developing types of industry other than what it called traditional, and traditional craft served local needs, it gave the lie to Vietnam as a static society best managed by Americans overseeing the production of handicrafts from unchanging Southeast Asian traditions for the dynamically changing West.

Next, *Techniques in Vietnamese Handicraft* tightly cropped the photograph around the women and their weaving (Figure 9). The book stressed nationalist themes along with modernity, in the context of which “craftsmen have always been free in this country” (An-Quan 1959: 5). Two years later, the photograph appeared in a newspaper article entitled “Mat making – Prosperous Handicraft” (The Times of Viet Nam 1961: 9) (Figure 10). The caption stressed economy and skill: “Mat weaving is one of the most prosperous branches of the local handicraft industry. Two craftsmen (or women) are needed to make the closely woven first grade mats.”



Whereas Wright and the U.S. State Department had iterated Vietnamese refugee artisans as “uncertain signs” requiring salvage, these other publications collectively undermined the American insistence that Vietnam should remain in a pre-modern state of manufacture because this benefited its economy along with the United States and the free world. Crucially, they asserted the compatibility of industrialization and handicrafts as dual if not interrelated industries viable in South Vietnam. There, during the late 1950s and into the early 1960s, many mass print media stories, such as “Handicrafts and Heavy Industry Not Incompatible Economist Says” (1961), highlighted the theme for the new nation’s citizens and for other nations in the region as well as English-language readers. Additional publications originating in Vietnam contended that industrial and manual manufacturing together engineered Vietnam’s growth towards economic sovereignty. *Vietnamese Handicrafts*, published in Hanoi (1959), took an even more aggressive approach to decentralizing American narratives of Vietnam by declaring, “the U.S. control over South Viet Nam...resulted in massive imports of American goods and in the subsequent ruin of local handicrafts” (1959: 3). In so doing these publications implicitly redressed the Orientalist tone, themes and messages of “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia” that, in *Interiors* magazine, had expressed Wright’s nation’s representation of Vietnam as a key component of a “natural, self-evident, ‘taken-for-granted’ global moral order” (Haldrup, Koefoed, Simonsen 2006: 175).



Figure 1 "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia," *Interiors*, 1956,  
p. 94



Figure 2 "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia," *Interiors*, 1956, p. 95

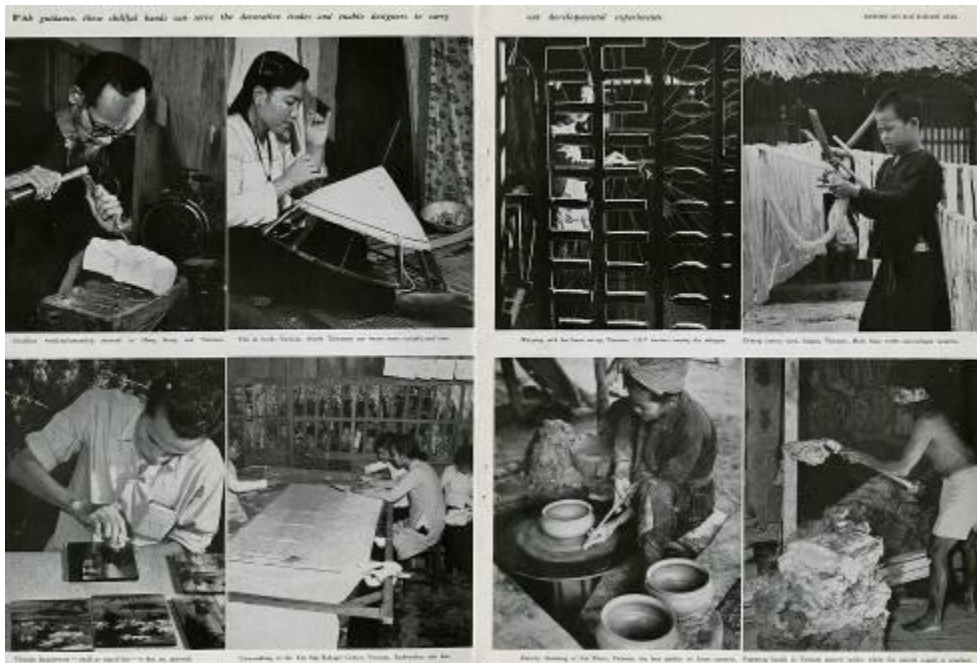


Figure 3 "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia," *Interiors*, 1956, pp. 98-99

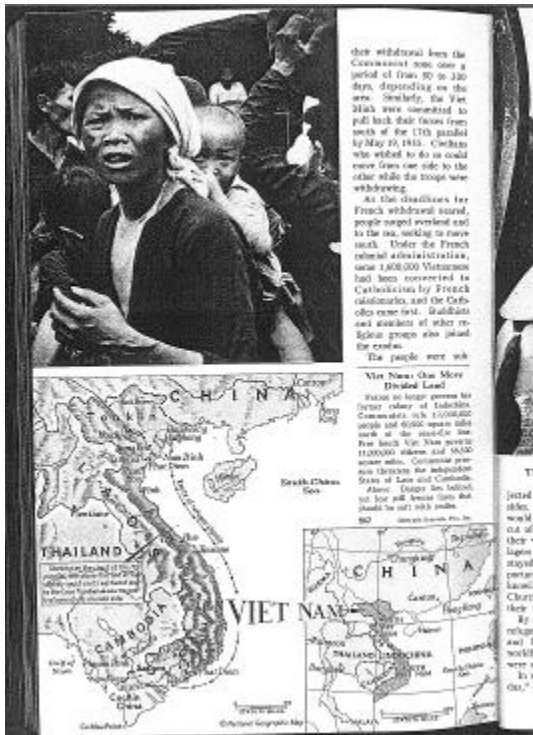


Figure 4 "Passage to Freedom in Viet Nam,"  
*National Geographic*, 1955, p. 82

SAIGON LOOKS PROSPEROUS AND COMPLACENT (above), but  
thousands of refugees such as those below are camped nearby



82  
Figure 5 "More U.S. Arms for Reds,"  
*U.S. News and World Report*, 1954, p. 23



Figure 6 "Resettlement of the Refugees from North Vietnam", 1955, p. 8



Figure 7 "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia," *Interiors*, 1956, p. 100



Figure 8 "A Glimpse of Vietnam", 1957, p. 51



Figure 9 "Techniques in Vietnamese Handicraft", 1959, p. 22



Figure 10 "Mat Making - Prosperous Handicraft," *The Times of Viet Nam*, 1961, pp. 8-9

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