The Visage of a Mother's Success

Author

ALISSA TU, Department of Literature, University of California San Diego

KEYWORDS:

Vietnamese Americans, Vietnamese women, beauty pageants, Vietnamese diaspora, cultural identity

ABSTRACT

This inquiry is a personal essay about Vietnamese American youth participating in a beauty pageant and how notions of Western and Eastern beauty collide between Vietnamese American youth and their mothers. What does the beauty pageant represent for those who have been exiled from their homeland? How do ideal versions of success influence the participant's identity or sense of self? Who is the ideal Vietnamese American beauty queen? By hypothesizing and understanding entry points that affect a mother's perspective, Vietnamese American youth, specifically daughters, must navigate different ideals to find a sense of belonging. While being excluded from parts of American society, Vietnamese American youth are faced with trauma, values and ethics, racism and sexism while also being the personification of a mother's success. Daughters who participate in a beauty pageant enforce a sense of community and are a symbol of hope to assimilate in America for those who have been exiled, and a participant's success is a product of this navigation and a mother's vicarious desires. In other words, the ideal beauty pageant queen must not only be able to uphold cultural values embedded in the beauty pageant but also their values entangled through familial relationships as well. As such, the ideal beauty pageant queen can balance both the daughter's (Western) and the mother's (Eastern) definition of success.

INTRODUCTION

Question of the day: What does my mother believe is the ideal Vietnamese beauty queen?

Nhi T. Lieu (2011) discusses in "Pageantry and Nostalgia: Beauty Contests and the Gendered Homeland," that "Vietnamese Americans have organized their own beauty pageants to provide alternative spaces which 'ethnic Vietnamese' women have the opportunity to participate and reign as beauty queens for their ethnic community" (p. 59). Beauty pageants within the Vietnamese community is the subject of much small talk. For most Vietnamese American youth, they learn about culture through their parents so if an ethnic beauty pageant is a way for young women to connect with their culture to participate, and they learn about culture through their parents, what is the relationship between parents and a beauty queen identity?

Possible answer: This pageant is for my mother, and she's reclaiming a homeland that doesn't exist anymore through my participation. By entering the pageant, I am tangible evidence that she is safe in America. The beauty pageant also affirms my mother has assimilated as Lieu (2011) notes, "Vietnamese ao dai beauty pageants are one of the most visible examples of Vietnamese immigrants trying to negotiate the process of assimilating into bourgeois American culture while remaining ethnically Vietnamese" (p. 61). By valuing my mother's definition of success and checking off each criterion, participating in the beauty pageant means her values are validated, and that she, vicariously, can also participate in the bourgeois American culture.

I call home. Some days, my mother talks a lot. Some days, my father hangs up after a few seconds because he's playing Uno with my brother. Other days, my mother says little. No matter what, I must be on-guard because my mother might ramble that she is miserable, scared for my father, or suffering. There is only so much I can listen to until my body becomes too weary. I like to think I won't carry my mother's sadness, but I realize I often do.

Thao Thanh Mai's dissertation, Dilemmas or Choice: Family, Love, and Status in the Lives of Young Vietnamese-American Women (2006), discusses the female Vietnamese American identity, and how family affects their idea of success and identity by interviewing five different Vietnamese American women.

Because their mothers sacrificed everything to move to the States, daughters feel familial obligations to succeed in ways their mothers want them to, and that success can be measured often through wealth and material status. In other words, there's a debt to pay to parents, and it becomes a major factor in how daughters proceed in life. Mai (2006) explores this guilt when she interviews with Kim who became a pharmacist because of her parents. "The 'intense guilt' [Kim] felt signified her obligation and responsibility to fix what she felt was an unjust situation for her parents" (p. 143). Kim justified that this decision was because her parents wouldn't have the chance to succeed in attaining wealth or material status. There's a weight to each action. Each decision affects how a Vietnamese daughter must fix, become, and do what their parents desire because their parents never had the opportunity.

Not explicitly discussed is how daughters are held to higher expectations than sons because the expectations of domesticity and physical appearance aren't discussed. Sons don't have to know how to take care of the house or make sure they look presentable at any given moment. This definition of success leaves out beauty even though it's a necessary tool to succeed in life.

There's an unspoken rule that beauty is also included in a parent's definition of a successful daughter.

When my mother is lucid or delirious, she whispers her confessions about the Vietnam War. Her voice titters like a hummingbird. It always feels like she knocks the wind out of me. Some days, she speaks about Indonesian beaches. Other days, she confesses what they did to her. Most of the time, she repeats the same phrase.

During a Zoom pageant practice, a contestant and I are in a breakout room. She tells me how her mother doesn't approve of her participating in a pageant because she isn't feminine enough. I don't have an answer most of the time because the reality is there's no fix-it answer. This is a common theme. A mother pushing her ideals onto her daughter. The amount of love a daughter receives is equal to how close she is to her mother's idea of success.

In Life Kit's "How to squash negative self-talk," (Kutes, 2021) Dr. Joy Harden Bradford discusses how the negative self-talk stems from early childhood as well as many of the -isms that exist in the world—racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc. So not only do I have a traumatic childhood, but I also have a lot of -isms attacking me. Dismantling those

-isms will take constant challenging, which feels a lot like suffering.

How does one accept the trauma that is mother inflicted? This trauma is guided in the ideals of success, perfection, and beauty. Not only does that trauma have to be felt, but how does one categorize thoughts as valid or unrealistic?

That's not the only abstract concept running through my brain. How do I challenge the Asian American woman stereotype? How do I show I'm not submissive,

obedient, and partaking in respectability politics? Am I a bad Asian woman if I acknowledge these perceptions but also use them to my own advantage? Every challenge comes with consequences, and every consequence includes suffering. The suffering is either incongruent with Eastern or Western ideals. If I succeed in one challenge, I am failing to uphold at least one set of ideals by doing so. There is no ending where I go unharmed. It is an absolute. The degree of suffering varies.

Transferring suffering, the idea that burdens from parents are passed onto daughters, is prominent in Mai's interviews (2006). Some women fully accept choosing a financially stable and high social standing career to lessen their parents' burdens. If they can give back sacrificing a self-interested yet unstable career because their parents sacrificed everything, they would. Others have negotiated with these ideas, but how much can be given away?

My mother used to say she was happy if her children had a good job and did well in life. Whenever she did, goosebumps crawled onto my skin. It was sickeningly full of guilt because the kindness and care in her words never translated into her actions. I was always missing something, and she reminded me constantly. I was a bad daughter so whenever she told me she just wanted me to be comfortable in life, I felt chills. Her actions said she wanted to pulverize me with her kind of perfection. The altruistic desire was never there.

When my mother learns I have a significant other, she is excited because that means I can rely on a family to support me. It's odd because I have no intentions of starting a family, and I don't know why a significant other signifies I am getting married. In her eyes, I am fulfilling her desires. To have a husband means I'll be financially supported and live comfortably.

Will I succumb to my mother's desires?

My aunt is the one who sees the pageant flyer first. She's the first to notify me about the mistaken accents on my last name. My last name is written as Tú and not as Từ. It feels like motherly figures like to take control for their "daughters" in hopes to live vicariously through them. The daughters don't necessarily want to pursue whatever their mothers have advised. However, the mothers push their perspectives onto them. The daughters feel the guilt or pressure to follow through with these ideas.

Throughout these interviews, Mai (2006) asked the Vietnamese mothers how they'd define success. More often, it would be about financial stability, a good steady career, and a significant other who is just as or more educated than their daughter. Those desires are pushed onto daughters, and they try to negotiate between their mothers' hopes and their own identity. Every interview complicates these two extremes. No one seems completely satisfied with who they are.

Throughout these interviews, Mai (2006) asked the Vietnamese mothers how they'd define success. More often, it would be about financial stability, a good steady career, and a significant other who is just as or more educated than their daughter. Those desires are pushed onto daughters, and they try to negotiate between their mothers' hopes and their own identity. Every interview complicates these two extremes. No one seems completely satisfied with who they are.

My mother texts saying my father hopes all my siblings and I have partners and get married. She tells me it'll make him happy. Another chill down my spine. I don't believe he'd bring up this idea on his own. It isn't like him. In my experience, he never had such a definitive opinion about my life. When I casually revealed I was

interested in girls, he didn't blink an eye. When I was in the hospital, he didn't say a word. It is unlike him to have such a strong opinion and voice them.

My mother texts saying my father hopes all my siblings and I have partners and get married. She tells me it'll make him happy. Another chill down my spine. I don't believe he'd bring up this idea on his own. It isn't like him. In my experience, he never had such a definitive opinion about my life. When I casually revealed I was interested in girls, he didn't blink an eye. When I was in the hospital, he didn't say a word. It is unlike him to have such a strong opinion and voice them.

It's like my mother spoon-fed him the answers. She asked pointed questions so his answers aligned with her ideas.

On my car rides with Contestant #12, she tells me about her winter break, and immediately concludes with she can't wait until this pageant is over. Her mother has reinforced her ideals and standards of beauty onto her. When she tells me that her mother says she needs to diet, that the áo dài's she tried on didn't fit well, or that it needed to be prettier, I swallow my sadness for her. Her mother is forcing her to win, which isn't the point. She is doing something for herself and is doing something outside of her comfort zone.

There's no set standard to beauty. Prettiness isn't defined by a body shape. It isn't defined by the perfect curls that the Vietnamese girls I've grown up with seem to have. It isn't shaped by makeup. It isn't an ideal personality. There's no such thing as an ideal beauty. It's all subjective so why is it that beauty is some marker of success?

I share Contestant #12's introduction post on Instagram because she doesn't have social media, and my only campaign is to encourage her especially after what was discussed in the car before practice.

Growing up, my mother told me that I needed to get my hair permed. Waves weren't that pretty. And growing up in traditional Vietnamese dancing, an environment where girls were constantly being compared and praised when they performed to the choreographer's liking, it was easy to feel alienated even more when all the girls had the same straight and thin hair. When they heat-ironed their hair into curls, the results were always beautiful. On me, it added more volume to my thick hair. On me, I felt out of place and in another world. On those days, I used to think that my mother was right, that I needed to do something about this hair to be beautiful.

After several years of straightening my hair in high school, burning strands so they were as straight as my mother's and hoping to burn away the thickness, I gave up on straightening. It was too much work, and I got more compliments with my wavy hair, much to my mother's dismay.

I felt like an outsider because of the waves. My hair didn't curl like the other girls. I was constantly getting told I looked bù xù from my mother. This hair I was born with wasn't close to what my mother wanted, and because of my natural, thick, coarse, hair, I didn't appeal to my mother's idea of success.

I buy lashes and eyeliners for the pageant. Mostly because I want to practice having stage makeup for the pageant. I realize that a month isn't enough time to perfect a skill. Instead, I get Invisalign two days before our second photoshoot and am self-conscious because the attachments are on my front teeth. The attachments look like tooth tumors. My speech sputters because of an artificial lisp.

I tell Contestant #6 about my Invisalign, and she understands the torture. We bond for the first time, and I am suddenly much more comfortable with pieces of plastic on my teeth. For the rest of the photoshoot, I'm joking and laughing with the female photographer, who

enjoys the company. Making fun of choreography and laughing like a scream.

When I visit for a school break, my mother tells me I'm prettier with makeup. I think she wants me to look closer to her success.

Contestant #12 initially joins the pageant because it's outside of her comfort zone, but she also tells me it's because her friend pushed her to join the pageant. At some point, she tells everyone that she hopes to practice her Vietnamese for the pageant since she doesn't use Vietnamese often in her immediate family. Because the pageant doesn't equip the contestants with any kind of Vietnamese help though, it is impossible for her to practice her Vietnamese. In other words, her goal is unattainable because there are no resources or support for Vietnamese.

As a personal anecdote, Mai (2006) discusses how her socialization is partially due to her entangled relationship with her parents. She defines, "By entangled family relationship, I mean that my family is an interconnected part of my identity and consciousness" (p. 89). Her identity, values, and morals are affected by her parents. This entanglement plays a strong part in how Vietnamese women in her interviews negotiate not only the notions of "success," but how these aspects are negotiated and expressed in their individualism.

Discussed explicitly in the conclusion, Mai (2006) relates her work to theorists of narrative and identity who discuss how reflecting on the past is an identity construction. To reflect, understand, and find coherence from the past mistakes, wrongs, and experiences can inform how a person can create the future self.

My mother teaches me how to fold eggroll wrappers with shrimp. At twenty-five, I start to learn how to cook from my mother. It's almost 11, I can feel my mind start to lose focus as I keep making the same mistakes. Unlike the times before, I'm not reminded of my mother's complaints or moments that I can't do it right which leads to you never being able to get a grasp at it. I place the filling in the middle of the paper, I break the shrimp tails, and I roll diagonally until I have to fold in the edges, and seal with egg. I screw up on the folding most of the time, but my mother continues to undo my wrapping, and shows me where I went wrong.

I keep trying until my eyelids get too heavy. She tells me that she'll show me how to make it next time I visit, and that it was a good try. Her tenderness is rare. Oftentimes, that tenderness is under a mask of guilt or shame, and for her to be tender means there is a mistake on the horizon. It's like waiting for a critique because I "should" know how to do this. Instead, her kindness is authentic and nourishing. She notices the effort in the exhaustion, and patiently shows me how to fold. These moments are rare, and I cherish it even if she'll critique me tomorrow.

"You have more of an aggressive posing."

"What does that mean?"

"Never mind. I won't say it."

"Tell me!"

"I'm going to stop talking. It's a good thing."

The other photographer that day is a man, and I end up just flirting with the camera afterwards, teeth tumors and all.

My mother used to tell me that I should do things to my body to look prettier. She laughed about my tiny boobs and joked about getting plastic surgery to have them enhanced. She wasn't joking most of the time.

When I finally tell my mother that I am in a pageant, she asks if the other contestants are pretty.

According to Lieu (2011), "Ao dai beauty pageants are significant not only because they bridge symbols of

the past with bodies that represent the future, but also because they work ideologically to evoke an "imagined community" that authenticates the persistence of Vietnamese ethnicity…" (p. 61). I wonder what the imagined community my mother wants if I am her symbol of success. Does she live vicariously through me to be a part of a community that she can't fully access?

Jennifer, a high school interviewee for Mai's (2006) dissertation, discusses how she didn't fit in with other Asian girls, and pointed out that Asians should assimilate and be "normal." According to her, her mother is "unassimilated" to America, and Jennifer dichotomizes her life into Asian or American.

She attacks Vietnamese beauty pageants by saying "I think it's a play on being exotic. And then you invite all the white people and the council members, people like that, and you try to make up publicity and fund raise. I think it's selling our exoticism…you know, this is why we're always seeming different and foreign" (p. 125).

Not a lot of white people show up to my pageant. The pageant is selling something, but it is not for white folks. It's a dream for Vietnamese people. Mothers live vicariously through their daughters. The Vietnamese community dream of pageant girls because they symbolize the American bourgeoise, and that representation shows that they can also, one day, acculturate into that class.

Not a lot of white people show up to my pageant. The pageant is selling something, but it is not for white folks. It's a dream for Vietnamese people. Mothers live vicariously through their daughters. The Vietnamese community dream of pageant girls because they symbolize the American bourgeoise, and that representation shows that they can also, one day, acculturate into that class.

Though, I have to give it to Jennifer. Selling exoticism is just another way to say fetishization, and it's a game I play into until I win all I need. The consequences are always worse than the winnings.

A contestant's mother calls on the last day of practice and demands to speak to the "boss" to ensure her daughter is at practice and not somewhere else. I've seen this scene play out in different situations: church, community college, and during classes. There's always an inkling of paranoia. I see the mother's concern as crossing boundaries. An overbearing and overprotective Vietnamese mother is like a modern-day villain, given too much of a backstory and complicated. Rooting for the villain is a kind of harm that I wish people would stop projecting. Pain is still pain even if the trauma is the origin.

Before I knew my flight out of Seattle was canceled and I was staying in Olympia longer, my family and I played bingo. My mother laughed and called numbers like she was a child who was enjoying games. It was a small spark of joy. She put cash in red envelopes. She told me about her unlucky nickname. Snow blanketed the outside world. Our Christmas tree was still up. My mother's laughter. Her joy.

I treasure the moment. I treasure this happiness in her.

I choose to fulfill my duties as First Princess, the runner up to the queen because if I am not completely and utterly the dripping image of success according to my mother which is a beautiful Catholic Vietnamese woman who is financially stable, my mother can still brag that her daughter is a princess. Because even if I fail at being beautiful, even if I fail at being Catholic, even if I fail at being the daughter she wanted, she can still be proud of me.

Mai (2006) finds and concludes in her dissertation that "the discourse of success as it is in articulated in my socialization and within the Vietnamese community involves one's whole way of being and that involves

how one carries oneself, who one associates with, the decisions one makes and the moral implications attached to them, how one represents oneself and one's family, and much more" (p. 170). Success is defined in Vietnamese women as their whole being and life. How others see these women in all aspects of her life is synonymous to her success.

My mother wants to live vicariously through her idealized version of me. Her daughter who has straight thin hair, who follows every Catholic rule to the period, who has bigger boobs and prettier makeup. She wants to live through her subjective successful daughter.

All I want is for my mother to love me. I want to be able to have conversations with her. One of my goals includes perfecting Vietnamese so I could write a love letter to her. I want to be able to make her feel loved because maybe then she would stop telling me I am useless. That I'm, good enough. That I'm someone she is proud of because I am me. Instead, the only times I make her happy are when I'm doing the chores that relieve her of time, when I go to church without her reminders, and when I pretend that I believe in the same things as her. I realized a long time ago, that it isn't possible to be what she wants, and her approval will never come.

But it's complicated. As much as I know I won't ever receive that approval, I still crave my mother's happiness. Whenever she praises me for washing the dishes without her asking, whenever she calls me a "good girl" for attending a holy day of obligation, whenever she finds harmony in teaching me to roll eggrolls, and whenever I can see the joy on her face as she tells me stories during bingo, it feels like intimacy is being fulfilled. If I can continue to hide the parts she doesn't enjoy, will I continue to receive that joy? Can acceptance be partial? Do I need her to love all of me? And do I need to love all of her?

The voice in my head that constantly suffocates me is my mother's. Her voice haunts me in Vietnamese, but her implications consume in English. Though, I'm unsure what to make of it because things have changed. I don't live in the same house. I can convey ideas in Vietnamese to her on a basic level. I have given up on my mother's ideas of beauty. I have given up on her desires of who I should be. I have given up on being a proper Catholic Vietnamese daughter. Yet her voice still tramples my thoughts. They still hum in the background like a lullaby.

References

Dutes, K. (Host). (2021, December 16). How to squash negative self-talk [Audio podcast episode]. In LIFE Kit. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2021/12/09/1062746913/how-to-stop-being-self-critical-and-silence-negative-self-talk

Lieu, N.T. (2011). "Pageantry and nostalgia: Beauty contests and the gendered homeland." The American Dream in Vietnamese (pp. 59-77). University of Minnesota Press.

Mai, T. T. (2006). Dilemmas or choices: Family, love, and status in the lives of young Vietnamese-American women. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of California, Davis.