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American Dreams: Yale Young Global Scholars through the lens of an international student.

To provide some background information about me, I am Jason Trinh, or Vũ-Ngọc Trinh-Đình. Those are not my legal names though, because I am a male transgender who came from Hanoi- the capital city of Vietnam - and just like any other transgender, I don't have a legal name that I want to identify with. I was born in a typical middle-class family of Vietnam, where I grew up with little expectations from my extended family, and my educational history is full of Vietnamese-speaking public schools.



Me day-dreaming at Pierson College's yard in a sunny summer day of Yale Young Global Scholars, International Relations & Security (IAS) 2018. Credit: Joseph Lee.

Therefore, YYGS IAS 18' acceptance letter was a more than a dream came true for me. I became the first person in my extended family to go to the United States, even just for visiting. A month before my 27-hour flight to the US though, my grandfather passed away. I still can remember how my mother murmured desperately to my grandfather who was still conscious but with a lot of equipments holding his breath, "You promised to take Ngoc to the airport, do you remember? You

promised to celebrate Ngoc's birthday, do you remember?". He died after eight hours of staying in the emergency room. I left Vietnam with a lot of emotions.

However, the negative emotions soon were suppressed by excitement as YYGS provided me an opportunity to go to a foreign country all by myself, for the first time in my life. Arriving at Davenport for checking in before going to my room in Pierson, I was in awe just by looking at the architectural designs of Yale. Knowing that I was having serious jet lag, I thought I should take a small nap, but the excitement suppressed my futile feelings. I ended up going around and talking to many people. Those small and random talks I had at YYGS added up until the last day, when I realized that I have met more people coming from the most diverse group that I have ever met in my entire life in Vietnam.

And did that terrify me, as an introverted person who likes to talk but also needs a lot of personal spaces to 'charge' my energy to not panic in front of more than 200 people coming from all 50 states of the US and 130 different countries at some point during my time at YYGS? Yes, it did. Although I am an energetic photographer, most of the photographs I documented at YYGS were highly personal. For example, I felt the urge to document the messy dorm room I occupied at Pierson College, or the soft sunlight that spread through Pierson's buildings which I often observed unconsciously at the table in Pierson's yard, where I built a capstone project about land corruption with 3 other students coming from 3 different nationalities.



My messy dorm room on the 4th floor of a building in Pierson College.



Pierson College Common Room, where I first met people with the same Capstone Project topic, also where I conducted all my researches for the Capstone Project presentation in the last day.

Believe it or not, YYGS helped me understand the American Dreams that has obsessed many people in my country.

I do not have an American Dream as in *I want to live in America* sort of dream, nor I would encourage anyone to have one, but I do appreciate the meaning behind it. For me, the American Dreams are not always about America itself, but it is about the very people who desire to seek a better reality, a better living dimension. The people who have American Dreams are those who are often not happy with the country or the situation they are living in that they fantasize about a foreign country which they have never been to, a country which triumphs the motto “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Essentially, the spirit of “American Dream” itself is not bad, because it shows that people *just want to have a better life*.

Life.

I had to come to Yale University one day before the official start of the program. I arrived at Davenport, feeling extremely excited but also empty because of serious jet lag (Vietnam is 12 hours ahead of America) and the unspeakable scares in a strange country. I was greeted by extremely friendly staffs and instructors, who eased my anxiety a lot. I was assigned a single dorm room at the resident hall for males (YYGS has a policy to assign resident hall according to your gender identity, not biological gender). Probably a few hours later, people started coming and occupying the resident hall. Some families came helping their children to settle down. I met other students living at the same floor. The mother of my dorm-mate gave me a hug and complimented me for how brave I was to travel alone for half of the Earth. Such a simple action alone, actually warmed my heart and comforted me that everything would be alright.

Everyday, I woke up at 6 AM or so without an alarm, because I was still struggling with jet lag. An email would arrive at exactly 7 AM announcing my schedule. I would attend lectures, breakout sessions, seminars, family times, capstone project. I would have lunch and dinner at Pierson Dining Hall, or sometimes went to have food at stores around the campus (I tried Shake Shack for the first time!). Such schedule might sound boring because it mostly repeated everyday, but the excitement of going to class to learn things that are really interesting never faded away. Other YYGS students were all really unique in their own sense, and they were all really open-minded and caring about each other.

Liberty.

Although I had always imagined that American education was extremely different from the education I received at public schools in Vietnam, I had never had the chance to experience a profound and critical discussion-based education until I went to YYGS; and I had never actually met and got to know people who had different opinions than my country's political agenda until I went to YYGS. At YYGS, I was able to express my ideas in open-minded and constructive discussions not only during seminars but also during daily conversations during breakfasts, lunches, dinners and even random discussion when we were hanging out at the yard or basement. With my passions in politics and international relations, the liberal arts education of YYGS gave me a golden opportunity to talk, to question and to explore different fields in my potential major in college. The instructors were extremely friendly and helpful. They played the role of guiding students rather than teaching, and I personally think that is what makes YYGS unique in their way of education. The combination of big lectures and small seminars was ideal, as it still gave students the glimpse of different international relations topics while still gave rooms for students to discuss and maximize their academic curiosity.

The Pursuit of Happiness.

I celebrated my 17th birthday at Yale. The sunlight on that day was so soft that it slipped through my dorm-room's window aesthetically. I turned on my favourite lofi hiphop track, featuring a messy poem about summer thunderstorms. My birthday was quiet. The only birthday gift I received for my 17th birthday was from another YYGS student, who gave me a self-draw card. I am not good at expressing emotions verbally, but if Hadley is reading this, I just want to say that words cannot describe how much I appreciated you.

Because of YYGS, I made many friends from different countries and nationalities who later on became the essential parts of my life. Though distance is separating YYGS friends geographically, the groupchat of IAS 18' students is still active and many people keep having reunions around the world. The friend network is one of the best value of YYGS, as those YYGS friends are potentially the tour guides that everyone needs when coming to a new country, supportive of others when it comes to advising about colleges and life in general. As I previously mentioned, the community of YYGS is extremely accepting, constructive and supportive. During my time at YYGS, a lot of people made me feel like home and erased my anxiety of being alone in a new country. I would like to

thank all of the YYGS staffs, my friends in IAS 18', and my dorm-mate's mother who gave me the hug on my first day at Yale.



My Capstone Project friends. Our topic was “Natural Resources and Political Power”.

In conclusion, the education, the community and the love at YYGS, I feel so fortunate to receive that for the first time in my life, I understood why people idealize the United States and its education: although many dark sides still emerge, there is still hope for the hard-working people, and there is always encouragement for free debates that people like me cannot find at our very homelands. The day I came back to Vietnam, I regret nothing at all. I knew that if my grandfather was watching my whole journey, he would be happy to know that I had always been thinking about how to make the lives at our homeland better, because we all have some kinds of “American dreams”, where we seek Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. It’s not about America or its education anymore, it’s about the lives of people who don’t have the equivalent life standards around the world and how they work so hard for a better life.

The last word I want to tell YYGS friends is that, if you are coming to Hanoi - the heart and the capital city of Vietnam - please do not hesitate to contact me. I love you all very much.