Discussion Questions for ***The Beautiful Country***

**Directions**: These questions are only for our discussion next week 2/26 and to give you some hints about what the in-class writing will be about.

Instead of responding to these as homework questions, you’ll prepare a working bibliography for your research topic, due at the beginning of class next week. NOTE: the working bibliography assignment sheet is posted on the course website.

1. The screenwriter, Sabina Murray, said that one of her challenges in telling the story was the limited dialog available for the characters who spoke mostly in a language that was unfamiliar to them. She wanted to show them as intelligent and dignified, even if their dialog was, in a sense, childlike. Do you think she succeeded? If so, how? What aside from their language indicates intelligence? Did Binh, Binh’s mother, and Ling, to take just three characters, manage to seem dignified, despite the indignities they suffered?
2. Consider the advice Andrew Lam gives in “Letter to a Young Refugee.” In what ways are his lessons demonstrated in the film? We don’t get much about the refugees from the French Revolution who flee to England, just a brief scene at the end, but do you think any of Lam’s advice would have been useful to them, as well? Why or why not?
3. Both the screenwriter Sabina Murray and Andrew Lam reference Homer’s *Odyssey.* If you know that story, consider in what ways Binh’s experience parallels that of Telemachus (the son of Odysseus). The similarities are subtle, but what do they add to our understanding of the human experience in general?
4. Consider how Andrew Lam’s discussion of Vietnamese folktales and the ways second-generation Vietnamese children react to them relate to this film. If Bihn’s story were to be adapted for a Vietnamese audience to be more in keeping with the folklore Lam describes, how might the plot be changed? If Ling’s story were to be continued for an American audience, what is the most “American” ending you can imagine that would still be in keeping with the character and her situation as we’re given it in the film?
5. Two of the reviews I’ve posted comment on the film’s ending. Do you agree with them about it? Why or why not?
6. The screenwriter said that she really wanted to use a narrator in some of the scenes to compensate for the necessary brevity of the dialog. What scenes would you have liked to have more insight into what the characters were thinking and feeling?
7. Consider the events that happen off-screen. If you had been at that café table with the screenwriter and her mentor, Terrence Malik, what scenes might you have suggested deserved to be shown. More of Binh in Houston, maybe interacting with others in the Vietnamese community there? Something of what happens to Binh’s mother after she left? More about Ling in New York? Explain what you think this would add to the film.
8. In your homework responses to Swades, opinion seemed to be divided among you about whether Mohan was truly changed by his journey. Some very good responses said a good case could be made on either side. What about Binh? Do we see change in his character? What about Ling?
9. One of the film reviews I posted said this about what could be called the “political” dimension of the film: “The basic narrative of *The Beautiful Country* is powerful and timely. Relations between the United States and Vietnam may have evolved in the last 15 years, but the global traffic in human labor is, if anything, a more acute and pervasive problem today, and the middle section of the movie presents some of its cruelties without blinking.” Considering that the film was inspired by the fate of the Golden Venture, do you think the film succeeds in making Americans care about the indentured servants (or slaves, in effect) that operate as a sort of underground economy in our big cities and in agriculture? (You could probably include the Mexican family that give Binh a lift in this picture.) If the film does have a political “message” about this situation what might it be?
10. We get a lot more about what Mohan is thinking and feeling about his dual identity, Indian and American engineer, than we get about Binh’s feelings about fitting into neither his homeland nor the US, but there must be some similarities. Considering what Andrew Lam says about this in “Child of Two Worlds,” what do both films help us understand about that kind of identity problem.
11. Lam writes at some length about the Viet Kieu. How is their position similar to Mohan’s and other NRI (non-resident Indians)? How is it different?
12. If you follow this [link,](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/shocking-image-of-drowned-syrian-boy-shows-tragic-plight-of-refugees) you will see the picture of the Syrian toddler whose death by drowning “put a human face” on the current refugee crisis that has included “some 2,500 people who have died this summer attempting to cross the Mediterranean to Europe, according to the UN refugee agency, UNHCR” (here’s the URL in case the link doesn’t work: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/shocking-image-of-drowned-syrian-boy-shows-tragic-plight-of-refugees>) Is there a visual image from the film that might have a similar impact, either to shine a spotlight on that particular refugee experience, or on the plight of undocumented (and often captive) workers in the developed world?