Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: Huy Dieu Trinh
Interviewer: Katrina Trinh
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KT: Today is March 2\(^{nd}\), 2012 and this is an interview for UC Irvine’s Vietnamese American Oral History project. I’m Katrina Trinh. What is your name?

HT: My name is Huy; my last name is Trinh.

KT: Date of birth?

HT: I am born in April 4\(^{th}\), 1957.

KT: Place of birth?


KT: What are your parents’ names?

HT: My father is Zhen Gao meng. My mom is lam nam den nung.

KT: Can you describe them?

HT: They both come from China. Immigrate to Vietnam, a long time ago.

KT: mhmm. So what did your father do for a living?

HT: My father is a business man. My mother is a housewife.

KT: So, what did your dad sell?

HT: My dad sells ceramic stuff.

KT: Where did he do his business?
HT: He did his business at Saigon, Vietnam. And sell the stuff for the local people.

KT: So, you grew up in Saigon, can you describe your hometown?

HT: Yeah, my home town is a very small town, but has a lot of population.

KT: mhmm.

HT: yeah, people get up and do business every day.

KT: So, have you lived anywhere else, other than Saigon?

HT: Umm…no.

KT: Can you tell me about any of your childhood memories?

HT: I don’t have much memories since I left Vietnam for a long time.

KT: ok, what about any traditions?

HT: we used to celebrate a lot of Vietnamese or Chinese traditions like Tet or the moon festival.

KT: mhmm

HT: and we’d celebrate some local heroes.

KT: What are some of the main industries of your hometown?

HT: We used to do a lot of small business. We do a lot of farming around there and we sell household stuff.

KT: Was business good?

HT: Its ok. We just made enough to make a living.

KT: So, what were your neighbors like?

HT: My neighbors are pretty friendly. Yeah, we lived there for generation after generation. We know each other very well.

KT: ok, so what did you guys normally do with each other?

HT: We used to talk and have tea together and we used to socialize.
KT: what kind of local gatherings or events were there?

HT: We don’t have much gathering or main events over there. We used to have tea together or talk about personal life or daily life.

KT: How do you celebrate Tet?

HT: we used to go to a relative’s house and we’d gather together and eat. Watching the dragon dance.

KT: Did they have any special Tet activities in town?

HT: Normally we’d have a lot of dragon dance. We’d play with fireworks.

KT: How do you celebrate birthdays?

HT: We used to buy a birthday cake and gather friends and family together.

KT: What other celebrations did you celebrate, like weddings. How was that like in Vietnam?

HT: We have pretty big weddings. Most of the time they invite people to a restaurant and order food and celebrate.

KT: How is it different than an American wedding?

HT: It’s pretty same. Not much different.

KT: Ok, what jobs have you had?

HT: I used to be a student. At that time I was still a little kid.

KT: Can you describe your school life?

HT: The school is a small school but pretty crowded. We don’t have a lot of resource.

KT: mhmm. Ok, so what about the teachers- what were they like?

HT: The teachers were very strict and we have to listen and obey them.

KT: What would happen if you didn’t listen to them?

HT: we will be punished.
KT: How would you be punished?

HT: We would stand in front of a wall and write pages and pages.

KT: Would you ever get hit?

HT: We used to be at that time.

KT: Yeah. So about your family. What do you remember most about your grandparents?

HT: My grandparents passed away when I was before I was born so I don’t really remember them.

KT: Did your parents ever tell you about them?

HT: No, they were pretty busy. They were doing business every day.

KT: What languages do you speak?

HT: I speak mandarin, Cantonese, and Vietnamese.

KT: Did you speak in a different language depending where you are?

HT: It depends on the friends I have depends on the school I go. If I’m going to a Vietnamese school I’ll speak Vietnamese. If I go to a Chinese school I speak Chinese.

KT What about at home?

HT: At home I speak Chinese with my parents.

KT: Which one, Mandarin or Cantonese?

HT: I actually speak Fukanese dialect.

KT: hmm. Where is that from?

HT: That is from the Fu King district. It is a very small Chinese Province.

KT: Which occupations have your family members held in the past?

HT: Like my brother? Sister? Or what?

KT: Let’s go with your oldest brother.
HT: My oldest brother joined the military.

KT: What is the name of your older brother?

HT: My older brother is Trinh Thaun Huy. And he served in the South Vietnamese army.

KT: What about your other brother?

HT: My other brother, the other one also joined the South Vietnamese army.

KT: What about your younger brothers?

HT: My younger brother went to school.

KT: How about your sister?

HT: My sister went to school, also.

KT: How much education did your family have in the different generations?

HT: My father and my mother don’t have a lot of education. They were about sixth grader. At that time going to school was pretty hard. Most of the time they had to go help their father do business. You know, support the family.

KT: What about you and your siblings? How was your educations?

HT: Yeah, my and my siblings all graduated from high school.

KT: Did you know how your parents met and married?

HT: Yeah, they met in China, a long time ago.

KT: Do you know if it was an arranged marriage?

HT: It was kind of like an arrangement.

KT: Do you know why they decided to move to Vietnam?

HT: At that time I believe they moved to Vietnam to make a living. It was pretty hard to make a living in China at that time.

KT: In Vietnam or America, did your family hold annual gathering or reunions?
HT: Yeah if we had a birthday we would celebrate the birthday. We’d go to my brother’s house or he would come to our house. We would also celebrate Tet festival.

KT: What is your favorite thing to do with your family?

HT: I like to gather our family together and we talk and we, you know, share our memories.

KT: Do you have a souse?

HT: Yes

KT: If so, how did you meet and marry?

HT: Yeah I met my wife at Pasadena City College. We know each other for about four years then we married.

KT: Ok, do you have any children?

HT: Yeah, I have three children.

KT: What did they do?

HT: My oldest son graduated from school and already has a job. My second son is still in school, in Cal Poly. My third one is Katrina Trinh, she is in UC Irvine.

KT: Did you talk to them about your history?

HT: Somehow, but not much.

KT: How come you don’t talk to them about your history?

HT: Most of the time we are busy and sometimes the kids don’t feel that interested.

KT: How come you don’t think your kids are interested?

HT: By their showing. You know, some do, some don’t.

KT: Does your family have any special sayings or expressions?

HT: No.

KT: No? ok. Are there any special traditions or customs that you have?
HT: Family traditions… we don’t have much. Normally we are very busy. My father had to do business and mother had to take care of the children at home., and at that time we were still young and at school.

KT: Did you create any traditions while in America?

HT: No.

KT: No? Ok. For the same reasons? You were busy?

HT: Yeah

KT: Does your family have any alters to keep your ancestors?

HT: We do, but we…What’s an alter?

KT: It’s the place where you put a Buddha or wherever, or it’s the place where you put a picture of family.

HT: Yes, yes we do. I have a picture of my father and my mother’s picture.

KT: Do you do anything special to the alter or around the alter?

HT: Yeah, my when my father and mother pass away, every year we would go to the cemetery and gather together over there and just share some memories and stuff.

KT: mmkay. Does that ever change in America?

HT: Ughh..no. not much, not much.

KT: No. Ok. What is the difference between worshipping your ancestors in Vietnam then worshipping them here in America?

HT: There isn’t much difference. It’s the same traditions.

KT: Ok, what religions do you practice?

HT: My family doesn’t practice any religion, but they do remember the ancestors.

KT: Ok, so how did the war in Vietnam affect your family and community?
HT: Oh it effect a lot. The war make people sad and very poor. We spend a lot of money on the war, a lot of resource and we don’t have much, you know?

KT: Did a lot of your resources go to the soldiers?

HT: Yes, most of the money goes to the soldiers, to defend the community.

KT: Where did you live during the war?

HT: I live in Saigon.

KT: Did you have any occupations in the war?

HT: No, I was a student and I was very young at the time.

KT: So how were your family members involved in the war?

HT: Only my brother joined the army. My father not because he was too old and he do business and that’s all.

KT: So why did your brothers decide to join the army, do you know why?

HT: That’s an obligation. It has to be done. Everyone 18 years or older had to join the arm, to serve the country.

KT: How old were you when the war started?

HT: When the war started I was sixteen years old.

KT: Were you ever captured by the enemy?

HT: No I’m not, I’m still a kid at that time.

KT: Do you know anyone who was?

HT: My neighbor; they are not captive, but after the war they had to be sent to a reeducation camp.

KT: Do you know how it was decided who went to these reeducation camps?

HT: Yeah, most people joined the South Vietnamese army or they were in the government.
KT: So you neighbors worked for the government?

HT: Yeah

KT: Do you know what they did?

HT: They are in the army but they had a high rank.

KT: So what do you remember about that time period?

HT: It was pretty hard at that time. We don’t have much food you know? And the communist tried to thin out the city or tried to move them to the country, to do the farming.

KT: How come they wanted to thin out the population?

HT: It was easier to control and if there wasn’t that much business in the city, people would move to the countryside they make their own living by doing farming they will help out a lot in the city.

KT: Were you or anyone you know sent to a reeducation camp?

HT: Just my neighbor. Yeah they went to the reeducation camp.

KT: Do you know whatever happened to them?

HT: I don’t know much because it was pretty hard to contact them at that time.

KT: did you receive any injuries or disabilities or your family member receive anything of that kind during the war?

HT: Yes, my brother he got an injury during the Tet Offensive against the North Vietnamese.

KT: Do you know what happened?

HT: He got a bullet grazed to the neck. Happily, fortunately, it wasn’t very serious.

KT: Does he ever talk about that?

HT: Yeah, he stayed in the hospital for a couple of days.

KT: How did you find out about it?
HT: Yes, somebody came to our house and told us about it.

KT: Did you try to go see him?

HT: No we can’t go in.

KT: Why wouldn’t they let you go in?

HT: It was during the war time so no one could go in the army camp.

KT: What was it like leaving your home country?

HT: It is pretty sad to leave our country, but for the future, for our generation, it was better to leave our country. We have to have more opportunity.

KT: What did you think of US policy during and after the war?

HT: I believe the US wanted to pull out of Vietnam as soon as possible because the war was dragging on for too long and it doesn’t go no where.

KT: Are you appreciative of them helping?

HT: At that time I don’t know. I believe that it doesn’t matter much to me.

KT: What about the French?

HT: The French, at that time they already left and America is going in and I was too young at that time and I don’t remember much.

KT: So why did you come to the US?

HT: Because of the oppression of the communists.

KT: What was the journey like?

HT: The journey was pretty hard. We had to go by boat and stay on the boat for seven days. At that time we had some water but no food at all.

KT: Leaving from Saigon, where did you leave to?
HT: I go to a small province, at night time. People were gathering us together to leave by boat to leave the country.

KT: So how did you get the money to leave the country?

HT: Part of the money come from my parents.

KT: So they gave you money?

HT: Yeah from their savings.

KT: Did they make you leave all at once, or did they separate you?

HT: We were separated. I leave with my two brothers.

KT: So when you left Vietnam, where did you go to?

HT: I go to Indonesia, in a refugee camp.

KT: What was it like in the camp there?

HT: At the camp was very hard, we have nothing. Especially in the beginning, there was no support, nothing was coming in. We had to buy stuff from the local people.

KT: So did you bring anything from Vietnam with you when you left to Indonesia?

HT: I can not bring anything, except for a little bit of clothing.

KT: What year did you leave Vietnam?

HT: I left in 1978.

KT: And when did you get into Indonesia?


KT: How were you treated in the Indonesian…

HT: In the camp, there weren’t many Indonesian in the camp. They treated us pretty well, but most of them were living in the mountain and we lived by the beach side.

KT: What were the living conditions like?
HT: It was hard, we had nothing at all.

KT: So, how did you sleep at night, like where did you go?

HT: When we went there we built a small hut.

KT: Do you remember how many people were on the boat?

HT: It's about a hundred people.

KT: Did everyone make it?

HT: Yes, everyone made it.

KT: Ok, that’s good. So which family members came along or stayed behind?

HT: My two brother, my two younger brother came along with me. My older brother stayed in Vietnam and my sister and my parents were in Vietnam too.

KT: Which two younger brothers came with you?

HT: The two younger brothers that came with me were Philip Trinh and Kenny Trinh.

KT: Did you lose anybody during your journey?

HT: No, luckily we didn’t lose anybody.

KT: While you were in Indonesia, what did you do?

HT: Normally, we didn’t have anything to do. We were waiting for resettlement, and sometimes we go to school to study English.

KT: How was it learning English in Indonesia?

HT: It was pretty hard since we didn’t have any resources. We don’t have much books over there.

KT: Was it hard going through the language barriers, since you didn’t know much English, and I am assuming you don’t know Indonesian.

HT: Yeah, it was pretty hard.
KT: Were there any Vietnamese teachers there?

HT: Yeah, they had some Vietnamese teachers there.

KT: How did you get to the United States?

HT: By resettlement, by the United States resettlement.

KT: Was it under any special programs?

HT: I think it was under some kind of resettlement program, I don’t remember.

KT: Where did you first settle when you came to the United States?

HT: I lived in Pasadena.

KT: What was it like living in Pasadena?

HT: It is a pretty good place to live. People are very friendly and it’s a pretty big city.

KT: So did you live with your two younger brothers?

HT: Yes.

KT: Were you living in a house or an apartment?

HT: It was an apartment.

KT: How big was you first apartment?

HT: Pretty small, you know. It was a one bedroom apartment.

KT: What was your first job in America?

HT: I was an electronic technician after school.

KT: But, before that what did you do?

HT: I go to school.

KT: What were your first impressions of coming to America?

HT: Its new to me and its new and pretty hard to me because of the language barrier.

KT: While living in Pasadena, you went to Pasadena Community College?
HT: Yes.

KT: Did your two younger brothers attend with you?

HT: No, they go to high school. They both go high school.

KT: So you were responsible for them?

HT: Yes

KT: How did you support you and your brothers while you were here?

HT: I have a part time job and I go to school and I got some grant from school.

KT: Where else did you move to?

HT: Yes, I moved to San Gabriel after two years.

KT: Did your two younger brothers go with you?

HT: Yes they did.

KT: What were they doing after?

HT: My youngest brother go to Cal Poly after high school. My second youngest brother, he got a job.

KT: What was his job?

HT: He worked at printing.

KT: How do you feel about your decision to come to America today?

HT: I feel pretty good. I had a good opportunity and I have a family and I have a house.

KT: Would you ever want to move anywhere else other than the US?

HT: No. I didn’t.

KT: How come you didn’t move to Canada or England?

HT: Because I love America.

KT: What were some of the problems you had starting a new life?
HT: I think language is the biggest challenge.

KT: What did you find most difficult about learning English?

HT: I believe learning any language is hard. Especially when you’re getting older. It is real hard to learn.

KT: Did you have any problems pronouncing?

HT: Yes, yes.

KT: What about understanding English? Did you understand it pretty well?

HT: Right now I understand it pretty well, but when I settled to the USA I don’t know much.

KT: Do you remember what your first words in English were?

HT: I don’t remember.

KT: Who helped you find a home in the US?

HT: Through my sponsor.

KT: Who was your sponsor?

HT: He was my older brother.

KT: Do you know how he came to the US?

HT: He came to the US in 1975, after the communist took it over.

KT: Do you know his story of coming over?

HT: At that time the war almost end and I believe he took an airplane at that time and it was very confusing because the communist were attacking the country.

KT: How did you find a job?

HT: By going through the newspaper.

KT: Was it hard for you to read English?

HT: At that time it was pretty hard. Normally I would have to use a dictionary.
KT: How did you communicate with your employer?

HT: Try my best. It’s hard but try my best. Speak slowly.

KT: What nationality was your employer?

HT: They were an American company.

KT: What did you do?

HT: I was an electronic technician.

KT: Oh, for your first job?

HT: Yeah, for my first job.

KT: So did your boss ever feel… did you ever feel discrimination from your boss?

HT: no, I don’t believe that.

KT: What were the occupations you had in the United State?

HT: In the beginning I had a part-time job working in a restaurant and then after I graduate I worked as an electric technician and now I am an electrician working for a plastic industry.

KT: What was your first job like?

HT: Oh, it was hard. We spend pretty long hours in the restaurant.

KT: What did you do?

HT: I’m a bust boy.

KT: Oh, ok. Did you make a lot of good tips?

HT: A little bit.

KT: How do you identify yourself in American society?

HT: Asian, I am Asian.

KT: More specifically, Chinese, Vietnamese?

HT: I am a Vietnamese American.
KT: Are you a citizen?

HT: Yes, I am a citizen.

KT: How hard was it for you to get a citizenship?

HT: At that time it was pretty hard. It was mostly in English. You had to go do a test and you have to pass the test before you become a citizen.

KT: How did you study for these tests?

HT: We had a booklet and we’d bring the booklet home to study and the hardest thing is understanding. When the interviewer interviewed you, pretty hard to understand me at that time.

KT: So what was the test like? Do you remember? Like what kind of questions were there?

HT: The question now is pretty easy. Do you understand English? Do you go to school? Do you have a job? You work? What kind of job do you have?

KT: What about the interview? What was that like?

HT: It’s like normal. They ask you a couple of questions and the most important thing is they make sure what you wrote on the application is true.

KT: Do you remember what kind o question he or she asked you?

HT: I remember he asked me to write a sentence.

KT: Do you remember what sentence you wrote?

HT: Yes, what school are you going to?

KT: They asked you to write that sentence?

HT: Yes, that sentence.

KT: Were you scared of anything?

HT: Yes, I was a little bit scared.

KT: What about your two younger brother? They’re citizens right?
HT: Yes, they are citizens.

KT: Did you guys help each other out, studying?

HT: A little bit. My brothers do a lot better because they went to high school. Yeah, they are younger than me. They learn English a lot easier than I am.

KT: So, do you like to vote in US elections?

HT: Yes, that’s a very good opportunity, back in Vietnam we don’t have that opportunity.

KT: If you were going to vote in Vietnam what would you vote for? Like what things would you vote for?

HT: That time I was too young to vote.

KT: But do you remember what the election process was like?

HT: It was pretty much like in America.

KT: Did your father vote in Vietnam?

HT: My father vote. A lot of time they forced you to vote, to make sure you vote.

KT: How come?

HT: Because they want to look good.

KT: So did they tell you who to vote for?

HT: Pretty much no. They won’ tell you who to vote for.

KT: But you’ll know who to vote for?

HT: Yes, yes.

KT: D you keep in touch with anyone in Vietnam?

HT: Yes. I keep in touch with my sister.

KT: How come she stayed in Vietnam?

HT: She has a business in Vietnam.
KT: What does she do?

HT: She is a businesswoman. She is a manufacturer.

KT: What does she manufacture?

HT: Furniture

KT: What kind if furniture?

HT: Table, chairs, that stuff.

KT: Like dinning stuff?

HT: yes.

KT: How do you keep in touch with her?

HT: Normally I call her.

KT: How are those conversations like? Are they long or short?

HT: There about thirty minutes every time I call her.

KT: What do you usually talk about?

HT: About how we’re doing here and how she’s doing in Vietnam.

KT: So how is she doing in Vietnam?

HT: She’s doing pretty well.

KT: How is her business doing?

HT: Her business is now a little bit slow, but still ok.

KT: Does the government help her at all with her business?

HT: No, no. Not at all.

KT: Does the government ever do anything to her business? Like having any strict policies?

HT: No not much. It’s almost the same now.

KT: How come your sister decided to open up a company in Vietnam?
HT: She likes to live in Vietnam and in Vietnam if you open up a business its better than if you go to work. They don’t pay much.

KT: How come she didn’t decide to start a business in America?

HT: It’s pretty hard for her because she don’t speak English.

KT: Does she like it there even though it is a communist country?

HT: She likes it over there.

KT: Do you know what made her want to stay there instead of move?

HT: Yes, a couple of reasons. The biggest reason is she is getting pretty old and she has a lot of friends and neighbors and it was pretty hard for her to learn English over here.

KT: What’s her life like in Vietnam?

HT: Now it is getting a lot better. People from other countries do business in Vietnam, so they create a lot of jobs.

KT: Do you think it is better in Vietnam now than in before?

HT: Yes, it is a lot better.

KT: So have you ever gone back to Vietnam?

HT: I went back to Vietnam about five years ago.

KT: That was in ?

HT: 2006

KT: What was it like going back?

HT: It was pretty amazing because we lived there and we came back there and there was a lot of changing.

KT: What were the most significant changes you saw?
HT: The city. A lot of the places were gone because they rearranged the city. A lot of business they build up, they need space.

KT: Did you find anything interesting when you went back there?

HT: Yeah the people. The people were pretty friendly and they want to know a lot of thing. Like how people live in the USA.

KT: Do you think people in Vietnam, now, would want to come to America?

HT: I believe so.

KT: Why do you think they want to leave Vietnam?

HT: Because over here they have more opportunity.

KT: What was the first thing you did when you went back to Vietnam?

HT: I go visit my friends and relatives.

KT: Did you go do anything fun? Like go see any tourist attractions?

HT: Yes, we go sightseeing.

KT: Where did you go when you went sightseeing?

HT: We go to Han Noi. The capital.

KT: What was that like?

HT: It’s a pretty busy city. The construction was pretty different than in the South Vietnam.

KT: How was it different?

HT: The construction in the north look like… I don’t know how to describe it.

KT: Did it have a Chinese influence or a French influence?

HT: No, no I don’t think so. The south had more influence by the French.

KT: Why do you think the South was more influenced by the French than the North?

HT: Because the French stayed in the South more than the North in that period of time.
KT: What else did you do in Vietnam while you were there?

HT: Most of the time we go visit our friends and family.

KT: So did you see anyone that you haven’t seen in a long time?

HT: We see some, but most of them left. Most of my friends left to live in a different country.

KT: Are there any songs or images that remind you of Vietnam?

HT: No, not much.

KT: What about the show Paris by Night?

HT: I watch a little bit.

KT: How come you don’t watch it that much?

HT: I’m not interested very much in those.

KT: You don’t like the musicals they do?

HT: No, I live here for thirty years. I don’t interest in those.

KT: What traditions or customs have you made an effort to preserve?

HT: A lot of festivals, such as Tet Festival.

KT: How do you celebrate those festivals in America?

HT: We normally gather family together.

KT: How is it different than in Vietnam?

HT: It’s not much different. IN Vietnam we have more time.

KT: Are there any traditions or customs that you had to give up or change?

HT: No, we still celebrate those events.

KT: Where do you like to celebrate these events? In the US or Vietnam?

HT: I believe in Vietnam. It is more fun than here.

KT: What makes it more fun than in Vietnam?
HT: Because there is more of a bigger community. Over here we have a big community but they live far apart. It is pretty hard to get together.

KT: How has the Vietnamese community change?

HT: It doesn’t change much. Actually, the Vietnamese community is getting bigger and bigger. Especially when they celebrate Tet in Orange County. Yeah there is a lot of people who go over there.

KT: Are you glad that the Vietnamese community is expanding?

HT: Yes, I do.

KT: Are you involved in the Vietnamese community?

HT: No, not much.

KT: Do you visit Little Saigon?

HT: I did.

KT: Why did you go there?

HT: Togo shopping, to go sightseeing, we eat.

KT: What do you think of Little Saigon?

HT: It is a place where we can get back the memories. It’s a lot of Vietnamese over there.

KT: What memories of Little Saigon does it bring back to you?

HT: We live in America. There’s a Vietnamese community and its like seeing family at home.

KT: What parts of Little Saigon do you like the most?

HT: I like to go on Bolsa.

KT: What’s on Bolsa?

HT: They have a lot of small business. They have a lot of small restaurants. A lot of Vietnamese.
KT: What things do you think future generations of Vietnamese should remember?

HT: I believe they should remember their ancestors. They should remember where they come from.

KT: What do you remember about your past history- your ancestors?

HT: I remember some, like my parents come from China and they moved to Vietnam when they were still young.

KT: So is there anything that is remarkable about the US that you like?

HT: Time is changing. I think I got used to living in America and I like to live here more than any other country.

KT: Would you ever want to go back to Vietnam, though?

HT: Yeah for a visit.

KT: How come you wouldn’t want to live there?

HT: All my kids are in America.

KT: Would you want to take you kids to America?

HT: Yes if they want to.

KT: Where would you take them?

HT: I would take them to see where I used to live. Show them different places.

KT: Like what? Do you remember how to get to different place?

HT: like Saigon.

KT: What else would you do in Vietnam with your children?

HT: Maybe visit friends or family.

KT: Is there anything other things you would like to talk about?

HT: That’s as much as I can talk about.
KT: Thank you for your time.