Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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Date: May 18, 2012
Location: Garden Grove, California
Sub-Collection: Thuy Vo Dang Oral Histories
Length of Interview: 00:48:35 [Session 2]
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TVD: Today is Friday, May 18. This is Thuy Vo Dang, with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project, interviewing Mr. Luong Van Ty for the second time at his home in Garden Grove, California.

TVD: To continue our earlier interview, I will begin today by asking some more questions about your life during the 80’s decade, as I believe you were talking about your life in Redlands right?

LVT: Yes, at that time I was living in Loma Linda, going to a school, (nearby) that city called San Bernardino College, while there, I studied more English, studied painting as well, there they also had classes to teach painting as well. They organized an exhibition for me there. At that time the people who were taking care of things for me asked me to paint a painting, and I ended up with something like 30-40 pieces. I set up an exhibition at Loma Linda University.

TVD: Could you talk some more about that exhibition, what was the theme, and were there any other participants?

LVT: Before that my sponsor took me to join the painters union in Riverside. I enrolled, while he paid my membership fee. He wanted me to participate in activities involving painting. I had said that I wanted to work in painting so he helped me out. Therefore I was able to take classes, and then create paintings for
them to put on display, while the doctors from the school invited guests. I had no idea, I was still unaware. That’s why at the exhibition, it seems that I didn’t have any pictures left over. I sold them all. My gosh! The people from the hospital along with the doctors had already graduated, actually the Vietnamese that came over who were all doctors started studying all over again at Loma Linda. Therefore many of them graduated, from Loma Linda that is. So then I joined the painters union of Riverside, was an active member, painted, quite typically at that, natural sights, and local landscapes. At that time perhaps I painted just to get back into the routine, so it seems like it was mostly scenery. Back then I didn’t yet produce any paintings based on my own creative ideas, which was also meant to retrain old skills lest I forget, since I hadn’t painted for a few decades. But I was still able to do so! For my paintings the other men bought the pigments, along with the canvas. Regarding the exhibition frames, there they rented them. When the exhibition was over, the items which were sold included a surcharge for the frame, while any paintings left unsold would be removed from the frame. But it seems like they were all bought up. It was quite well organized.

TVD: Do you remember what the exhibition was called? And the names of the organizers?

LVT: I had just come over then so I didn’t pay attention. They did a great job. I’ve forgotten already, it’s been several decades already. Although I seem to forget now I do recall it was at the school in Loma Linda.

TVD: So the exhibition was held in an American community?

LVT: Yes, in the American community, not Vietnamese.
TVD: So when you lived in Loma Linda was there a Vietnamese community there yet?

LVT: No, there wasn’t one there yet. There was one group, all from the group that came over... I followed the people who came under the HO (Humanitarian Operation) program as doctors, and scientists who at that time, because they could not complete their studies in Vietnam, continued studying here after coming over. Or else they were people who already graduated. There were doctors who were famous back there (in Vietnam), who after coming over went back to school and renewed their degree, there were many at Loma Linda.

TT: So does that mean those people also bought your artwork?

LVT: Seems to me that none of the buyers were Vietnamese, only American. Those people (Vietnamese) were recent students. Money to purchase a painting would have to come later, but they did come just to look around, since they knew I was in the painting profession. The people in the medical field also suggested that I study something practical like nursing, at the beginning, but in the end I felt like I needed to be a painter.

TVD: You said that the subjects of your paintings at that time were mostly landscapes. Did you come up with them on your own?

LVT: Yeah, primarily landscapes, from all over. When I first came over, they gave me a motorbike to use, 2 wheels, on which I carried my things around. When driving I’d often forget to pay attention, I would even get on the freeway and drive like anybody else. I don’t remember but the people over there were very nice. They took
me everywhere to paint, down all the back roads, accompanying me to paint, which is how the gallery came about.

TVD: You were over forty years old at that time right?

LVT: Yeah, at that time I was forty-something almost 50 already.

TVD: So you had gotten married already, and had children.

LVT: Yes I did. I had 6 children in Vietnam. It was at that time I did the sponsorship paperwork. Because before I left, I worked for an American office in Vietnam, meaning I worked at an American news department, hence I was also a former civil servant for the U.S., and I earned a salary at the embassy, so that when I came over and was asked about my personal work history, I clearly told them that there was a brief period of time that I worked at a news department. That over there there was a newspaper called Tu Do, which interviewed me twice. The head of the news department overseeing the paper hired me. Among my group I had many friends working there already, who were Vietnamese. At that time there was Mr. Pham Hoang, artist Pham Hoang was part of my group. Another man was Nguyen Khac Vinh, and 3 or 4 others as well, all artists.

TVD: So could you tell me what year you sponsored your family to come over?

LVT: I received a notice informing me, I don’t remember exactly but I heard that when a family member is a benefactor it’s just a matter of waiting. As soon as I was allowed I filed the paperwork.

TVD: So was that in the 90’s?

LVT: Around that time. I don’t remember clearly. But I think it was after ten plus years before they could leave, and come over. We were all reunited over here, my
wife and children came together. Some of my children, because they had already
started families over there, would have to come later.

TVD: So coming over the first time?

LVT: Yes, the first group consisted of my wife and youngest children, who were still
unmarried. The next time I sponsored my two oldest children, their families
including a grandchild of mine. Ah, that’s right, my daughter’s child. So that group
came last. These statues my daughter carried over. I left them over there and when
she came she brought them with her. This along with a painting that I received an
award for. My fourth son brought it with him. And my daughter brought the
statuettes. And then there’s my adult son, I told him to try to find, get this certificate,
and somehow he sent it to someone in France who then sent it to me since I hadn’t
brought anything over with me. So they delivered this to me.

TVD: So how many years were you apart from your family?

LVT: From ’75 until more than ten years later when saw each other again.

TVD: During that time, how did your family get by?

LVT: The younger children were still in school, they still went to school. They
studied according to the system over there. When I left there was one child who
went to high school, finished high school. All the other children went to school,
starting from the age of 5 or 6. At that time I was living at 24 Gia Lam.

TVD: How did you communicate with your family during that time?

LVT: At that time it was by mail. But I was hesitant, I was afraid it might cause
problems for my family back there. Since over there they still thought I was....

Sending letters home showed that I was close to the Americans, something which
caused trouble for my family. Therefore I was extremely cautious. When speaking I had to be somewhat careful, so as to not cause any complications for my family. It was really difficult, not until I sponsored them could I tell the truth. Tell all the real names. Whereas when I was communicating I would only use an alias.

TVD: So after you finished sponsoring your family, where did your family live? Did you have any children in San Bernardino?

LVT: Ah, At that time I was living down here already. Over ten years had passed. I had been preparing for them to come over. I began painting again in order to take good care of my family, and so I took my painting seriously. Therefore every year I after that I opened a new business, so I ended up with 6 businesses here, 6 years and 6 businesses.

TVD: What business?

LVT: The first time I opened a grocery market, selling Vietnamese food in Loma Linda, belonging to San Bernardino city. I seem to have still had extra money left over from my exhibition at that time. I took out that money, and opened a market. Each time it was like that, whenever I didn't have money my painting helped me immensely. It was always that way. When I was living in Vietnam it was that way, when I was living there I received money from painting which I then used to earn my living. So I opened my first business which was a market. I named it Reagan Market. The second business I opened was a Chinese herbal medicine store. By herbal medicine I mean oriental medicine. I named it Hong Lac pharmacy.

TT: Was that pharmacy here?
LVT: Yes, it was. When I moved down here I sold the market in Loma Linda, and came here. I bought a Chinese herbal medicine store, so then I had to learn about how the medicine worked. The owner stayed on to teach me. He taught me the proper way, he worked with me for a year, while I paid his salary. During that period of time, in one year it seems like I had four teachers. Every year I had a different Chinese teacher. During that time, they instructed me on how to prepare medicine. I studied step by step, after which I clearly understood each medicine. Moving on to my third business, I opened another building, a block, I call it a building. There I worked at, I believe it was an acupuncture clinic. I invited an acupuncturist back, and work in connection with the pharmacy. I didn’t study acupuncture, just herbal medicine. I needed to recruit a qualified doctor in acupuncture. Once that was going well I moved on to something different, a TV and electronics business (dan kim truyen hinh). I sold all types of electronic parts for various television brands. In Vietnam I had the same kind of shop at 124 Gia Long Street. So I repeated it all over again here. Then I opened a grocery store selling items to send to Vietnam, (like) silk, I had medicine, ginseng, etc. in stock already, while western medication I had to buy because people wanted to send that. That’s been 5 businesses already right? The sixth business that I opened was a station, a TV station. I named it Vietnam television (truyen hinh Vietnam). I worked 25 years and just retired. Along with the TV station, I also opened a radio station. The TV channel was BSCI 18. Programming was only 1 hour a day. When I started the radio station, we broadcast for 6 hours a day, 3 hours in the morning, and 3 in the afternoon.

TVD: Do you remember the name of your radio station?
LVT: Vietnam entertainment (Dai phat thanh van nghe Vietnam). In a little while I’ll show you the station records. The initials were VPTV for Vietnam Performance Art Television Embrace Network.

TVD: Did you do all these jobs alone or did you have someone else?

LVT: By myself. All by myself, I just hired people. I hired people to watch over. I have a niece/nephew, who follows along. I only have the one, the child of my brother. So my brother who I just mentioned has the last name of Nguyen. But I waited for them to come over, why?! I wanted to establish it for my 6 children, my wife also when coming over, business, each person would have a their own job. Whenever I was free I could paint and draw.

TVD: So in the end did they go along with your wishes?

LVT: They couldn’t do so. I worked while my children assisted. Then the time came for me to turn the business over to my children, since I had been able to do it all by myself not to mention the fact that there were many of them and they were still so young. I thought that way but reality was different. You can’t do what you don’t want to do. And my children didn’t like those jobs. But I’m a very open person. Back then because of family issues I was forced to do work for my family, meaning I couldn’t paint because I had to take care of my family, I was told I had to go out and make money, when I gave up painting I was full of resentment but I tried my best. Actually I don’t really need much money to live, just enough to get by. Painting allowed me to earn alot of money. Ah, I had a very special job. Here in the United States before I worked in business, I drew, drawing portraits. The money I earned from drawing allowed me to open a store.
TVD: I think you mentioned the fact that you drew portraits at Disneyland?

LVT: Yeah. At Movieland Wax Museum.

TT: That’s in Hollywood right?

LVT: No, here. In Orange County.

TVD: In Buena Park right?

LVT: Yep, it was similar to Disneyland, it was next to Knott’s Berry Farm. I drew for many years. After drawing there for 6 months I went to Hawaii to draw. At that time I still hadn’t opened a business. I drew until I earned enough to open that store.

TVD: How did you get that job?

LVT: I was tested. In the beginning I didn’t work by myself. When I went to go get tested, everyone else there was American, there were no other Vietnamese. They mostly made wax statues there. When I entered the people there suggested I draw portraits for visiting guests. So I simply applied and started working there. I had come to the Wax Museum just to visit for fun. I also could have drawn at Disneyland but I think the Wax Museum was closer to where I lived, which was in Anaheim at that time. When I applied for the drawing position there inside the meeting room, there were 6 people sitting down, all American, who then asked me to draw. They showed me how to draw using pastels on the paper that everyone had to use. There were two types of portraits I had to draw for the guests, they needed two kinds. The first was profile, second was full page. So if they requested me to draw profile, that type of drawing would cost 6 dollars. The people in the studio would collect 6 dollars, and if they thought my drawings were acceptable they would pay me a monthly wage. Any time I drew more than what my monthly wage was, then I would
take in 2 dollars for every 6 dollar drawing I sold. The company would take 4 dollars. Whenever I surpassed that (salary) amount then I would be earning my own commission and no longer the monthly wage. As I always reached the level of commission I never got paid the monthly wage. Many others who sat there (to draw) would earn monthly salaries, depending on whether they reached the target amount or not. But I was able to do it my first time out. Oh, let me retell you the story about when I first went in to get tested. After being asked I simply told them I knew how to draw in Vietnam. I drew pictures but not just to earn commissions like that. The most important thing was that 6 dollars also required a drawing in only 6 minutes. I couldn’t go over 6 minutes. Because of that I earned a dollar a minute, 6 minutes 6 dollars. While full page was 25 minutes for 25 dollars. The hardest thing was that I could never draw fast. The drawing also had to closely resemble the person’s face. They were there to have a good time. So I tried my best. They asked me if I could do it. If so they would hand me the paper to sign. They gave me a paper and colored pens and told me to go home, once I could draw okay then I could return, as soon as I could draw within 6 minutes. I told myself okay, I’ll do it. I went to work right away, I did it! Just 6 minutes!

TVD: So how long did you work at the Wax Museum?

LVT: I don’t remember exactly but for about a few years. I felt that if I worked independently I would make even more money, so that’s why I went to Hawaii. I worked for 6 months in Hawaii. I worked out there during the summer, near the beach, doing the same type of work. I went out and still drew within 6 minutes,
while I also took in 6 dollars. But I only had to pay to be out there. I paid rent to use the space.

TVD: But this was at the beach where you were drawing right? So why did you have to pay for that spot?

LVT: Of course I had to pay. It was called the International Market.

TVD: Oh, in Waikiki?

LVT: Yes, that’s right. I lived in Waikiki and drew there as well. I bought a booth in which to draw, but from 6 am to 6 pm I would go swimming at the beach, and have fun. I started work at 6 in the evening, and worked until midnight. Doing that type of drawing earned me alot of money, that’s how I was able to open my business.

TVD: Because of all the tourists right?

LVT: Yeah, they were all tourists. Although when I was doing that over here everything was already set up for me. Over there however I had to buy the paper (for the portraits) I sold. Work was alot of fun. It was just like playing around, joking just joking.

TVD: So when you went to Hawaii did you go by yourself?

LVT: Yeah, just myself. Back then I was living alone. I was here drawing at Ports O’Call in Long Beach before I went over there.

TT: San Pedro?

LVT: Yes, San Pedro, Ports O’Call in San Pedro. I drew in Ports O’Call quite awhile, a long time actually, at that tourist spot. I drew in several places, and when I had earned enough money I opened the business which I just mentioned.
TVD: Throughout your working life, either while drawing or in business, did you have any personal time in which to do painting?

LVT: I think I did rely on portrait drawing, that helped me immensely. I sat and drew all day, always drawing rapid-fire, really quickly. So I really had to train my hands. And had god not helped me, perhaps, my existence would have already been over. I had a home on Gia Long street, back then I was very happy. Coming here, my sandals were torn to shreds. I had nothing left when I got off the plane. But I managed to get by, thanks to God, but how I was able to become successful I will never know. But I was very frugal, each week I tried to save enough for a bar of gold. I only bought gold. I bought gold so that my money would keep its value. If I just held on to my money, then there would always be a friend or two, fellow artists, who would invite me to come along. But after awhile I found my own path. Those guys liked cars, gambling, and they lived through that. Myself on the other hand simply saved money to buy gold. I came back here, drew at Ports O'Call. When I began, saving up gold, a tael cost 300 dollars, later it rose to 800 dollars a tael. That was it, I realized how good my fortune was. With the value at 800 dollars a tael, I took the gold, at that extremely high price, and looked for a store to open. So the value had risen two, three times. If I just held on to my money I wouldn’t have been able to do it. I saved up gold and it gained value. Because I had a large amount of money I was able to open a business. Each year I earned a little profit, I would open (another business), with the intention of giving each of my children their own. My second child works in the television industry, with my station, he manages it because he is good with technology. Then my youngest child, even though coming last he studied in high
school over here so when he graduated he became my assistant. He was 18 when he started helping me. So I sold the gold and then started to open a pharmacy. While before that I opened a gallery at the market. The pharmacy came about because I moved down here, I drew and then I returned here to stay.

TVD: So when you reunited with your family where did you live?

LVT: In Garden Grove, close to here. Back then I lived in Westminster for a time, renting a house. Afterwards I was able to buy this house. I’ve been living here since, and when the time came to retire, I handed everything over to my children, who now pay the bills because I no longer have any income. So essentially they let me stay here, and watch the house. But the house belongs to two people, there are 2 co-owners, one lives on the other side, and one on this side. This side belongs to Lan.

TVD: What year did you retire then?

LVT: The year I turned 65.

TVD: So at that time you had already finished your work in business?

LVT: I was completely finished. I turned everything over to them.

TVD: So what was the goal of your retirement?

LVT: To paint, start painting again. I gave everything up. Many people ask me to return to work, to my former businesses, or to help my children out. I tell them their dad no longer works, that once and for all just let me do my own thing. They have everything already prepared for them, whoever can do it then great, whoever can’t handle it then so be it, they can sell the business. Each child has studied a profession, gone their own way.

TVD: So what are your children’s occupations?
LVT: Each of them now has their own profession. Three of them continued on in my business. But they work for other people and aren’t the owner.

TVD: So how about your wife?

LVT: My wife is sick, she’s lying in a nursing home.

TVD: How about when she first came over?

LVT: She was already sick at that time. She’s been sick for a long time. She doesn’t do anything, her whole life she hasn’t had a job. From the day we were married, she’s been sick. Actually having a sick person isn’t much trouble as long as I make sure she gets the proper nutrition. Recently, now that is, back then she was home with the children. After they started working, there was no one to take care of her, so she entered the nursing home, thanks to which she is now healthy. She has a type of neuropathic illness.

TVD: For a long time right?

LVT: Long time ago, way back before 75.

TVD: So could you tell me after you retired, what were your daily activities like? For instance upon waking up, what did you do, and where did you go?

LVT: After retiring, I think at that time I felt very relaxed, and content. Inevitably, there were times in the middle of the night, I would have a sudden interest in painting something, and start creating, at any time, sleep would no longer matter. All I would concern myself with was how to complete my artwork. Therefore whenever I do something I try my hardest, I’m only satisfied once I succeed. Because of that when I stay here I can do my work more comfortably. Even though I don’t have
money, I receive a pension, I worked all those years paying taxes so now I just get my pension money. That’s my spending money.

TVD: In your artwork, what are the themes that you chose to draw?

LVT: That’s why my exhibitions are for me to reminisce, to remember my past. My time living in my native country and nostalgia. I remember those things and my compositions are all on topics which require me to create, search out materials, read many books, and study history in order to understand. I want to represent these subjects accurately, which is very difficult. Because southern and northern Vietnam are quite different, and although I am a southerner, I paint scenes of northern people. So when I do a painting, many northern people think I am a northerner instead of the southerner I really am. I also paint Central (Vietnam) themes, but northern people are what I paint the most. Because they are more ancient.

TT: So have you gone back to Vietnam and traveled to the north?

LVT: I have, I spent a time traveling around the world. I would go and look at paintings, honestly I’ve been to every country. Because I worked at the station, and I would do reports, documentary work, on the living activities, in France, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey, all over China, I’ve been to Japan, in Vietnam I traveled from south to north. I went everywhere, but finally I decided to go back and follow my own pathway, traditional Vietnam. I observe the works of art from all around the world, and integrate them, I feel that observation is the very thing which empasses me the most, something I must do. Yet for myself, I feel that perhaps studying foreign techniques is also very useful. Up until recently I still hadn’t yet studied sculpture, so I recently took sculpting classes because I want to know how
to do everything. If my friends show me how to do something, yet I’m not satisfied then that’s not acceptable. But actually I have been quite successful. To me I feel like this is more than enough, 80 years old, at 79 still studying. 80 makes two years already.

TVD: Could you tell me some more about your art exhibitions? After you retired did you start painting again?

LVT: The first one was in Loma Linda, the second was this one here: Luong Van Ty – Art works in America, in 2001.

TVD: Was this a solo exhibition?

LVT: This time I exhibited along with artist Nguyen Khai.

TVD: So usually when you exhibit, how do you chose which of your paintings to exhibit, according to their theme?

LVT: That’s up to me, it’s my idea, my freedom.

TVD: Let me ask you some final questions then. Your ideas about the community, because you have been living within the Vietnamese community here for quite a long time. So living here from the 80’s until now you probably have seen many changes in the community. Could you share with me a little about your outlook regarding the Vietnamese American community?

LVT: About my community, according to me, especially since I work in media, perhaps following it closely. I feel there’s much love and esteem in this community. In my opinion everything is great. There’s nothing to criticise. It’s just that to me, an artist who paints, I personally save for politicians, that’s something which is beyond
my reach. I don’t think I have that ability. I really admire people with patriotic spirit. I very much support everyone, here activism is very effective.

TVD: So have you participated in any of those activities?
LVT: I participated through my program, I wanted to open a media outlet, I wanted my countrymen’s voices to be heared.

TVD: By means of the voice of entertainment right?
LVT: Ah, first of all there’s Vietnamese television, I want to tell the people in my country, to leave the country, leave it behind, of course I wanted to seek freedom, so I left. But that’s just the way I think, I have alot of creativity, therefore I save it for television which needs that as well. I returned to painting because it was necessary for me. When I was working, I supported all the organizations.

TVD: Okay let me ask another final question because I’m doing these documents to give to the next generation, in order to preserve the history of our community. Do you have anything which you haven’t yet said in this interview or from the previous interview, do you want to express your feelings about art or community, personal self, or family?

LVT: I only think that, I feel working in the art field my advice is that we should respect those that came before us, because they contributed many outstanding things. Even though the youth of today have their own unique qualities, one thing remains the same, we must remember our roots. That’s why whenever I create a work, I do it with my soul, tapping into tradition, emphasizing mostly tradition. As an artist I think just like the artists of the past that came before me, I feel that Vietnamese all share a common trait, even though it was during the age of kings, and
not democratic like nowadays, they held off being invaded. They kept their country for several thousand years, without being dominated, that’s a good thing. For this tiny nation, I sincerely recommend, with great insistence, Every person should respect their ancestors, the ancient people were great. I hope I am continuing in their footsteps. I look at the remarkable things that I’ve created and know my art will go on into the future. That’s what I wish for, even though in Vietnam I painted this way when I came over here my eyes were opened and I realized how small I really was. So all of us who have come over here yourselves as well, having this excellent opportunity here today, must try to distinguish ourselves, that is my wish. Everyone can lend a hand.

TVD: Thank you very much!