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Interviewer: Thuy Vo Dang
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TVD: This is Thuy Vo-Dang with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC Irvine. Today is March 5, 2013. I will be interviewing Mrs. Maria Nga Châu in Orange California.

TVD: First, please introduce your name.

MNC: My name is Maria Nga Châu.

TVD: What is your birthdate?

MNC: I was born in March 1st 1945

TVD: And what city?

MNC: I live in Santa Monica.

TVD: You currently live in Santa Monica but where were you born?

MNC: I was born at Nha Trang, ViệtNam.

TVD: Can you go back to your childhood in Nha Trang what was your special memory there?

MNC: Actually I thought that my childhood at Nha Trang, my parents told me about when I was born in 1945 which was during the starving time and the start of war world II from Japan, and after that my parents took me to Huế because they were from Huế. I only remembered that I lived in Đà Nẵng later on. In 1951, I remembered exactly that my father left Đà Nẵng to take the whole family to SàiGòn, and we lived there at that time. Later on we moved back to Đà Nẵng.
because my father was an officer of the train department, so he moved around a lot. We finally moved from Đà Nẵng to Nha Trang, and my family lived there until 1975.

TVD: Can you tell more about your parents?

MNC: My parents were from Huế, my mother was from a Catholic family and my father was from a Confucianism family, so the two levels of our family were different about both religion and class of family like rich and poor in general.

TVD: Were your father rich?

MNC: That was my mother. I thought my parent’s marriage had to overcome by far and beyond the struggling to be together, and they were very happy with 6 children. My father worked very hard and the last place he worked was at the train department. He made the railroad which went through Vietnam. My mother was a housewife, but she was a business minded woman. She had done well in many businesses and our sisters and brothers were growing up well because of that. We had educated part of it was from the push of my father and part of it was from my mother’s finance.

TVD: You say your family has 6 children, what is your order in the family?

MNC: I have three older brothers and 2 younger sisters.

TVD: How is the relationship among your family members?

MNC: We are very close together up to this time, we are very lucky to be all in America. My parents, sisters and brothers, nieces and nephews all came to America because of my younger sister back to 1970 she went to study abroad after passing the two high school graduating tests, and that was the investment my parents put on her according to my father ideas and my mother financial investment. She went to America to study since she was 18 years old. She studied really hard until 1975 she brought my whole family to America. Until 1989 we all slowly came here.

TVD: Can you go back a little and talk about the memory when you studied in VN.
MNC: When we were young we were very lucky to have our father who was an open mind about education and always led us to study in good schools. My younger sister and I studied and stayed at the dorm with the nuns at Đà Nẵng when we were young, so we had a good foundation in the family to live with our hearts by applying kindness and morals. My father always motivated us to study, so we continued on with our education. My memory about school was about the nuns, they were very strict. My father picked me home on the weekend, that time when I had to get back to school I was afraid of some older students that they would take away my food since I had a lot (Smile). There were also different classes of people and we all were afraid of the nuns. In general we had lot of characteristics of the students from a school under the nuns.

TVD: You lived in the dorm until what year?

MNC: I lived at the dorm for 2 years, from kindergarten until 1952, about 7 or 8 years old, that time we went to Sài Gòn, after that my father came back to Đà Nẵng, we still continued our education. That time we did not stay at the dorm but kind of part time at the dorm until I went to high school I remembered that I went out to study ViệtNamese program.

TVD: Was it public school?

MNC: Yeah

TVD: What subject did you like the most, how were your teachers in school?

MNC: The time I studied especially in high school it seemed like (clear the throat) excuse me, I liked literature, I was not so good with math, I liked sports very much. I remembered when I was in 12th grade I won a gold medal out of 100 countries. I also won a gold medal at Đống Khánh in a competition in Huế. My father was into sports, so he let us play ping pong or badminton, my brother played tennis. Our family was not economically high, it was all because of my parents who earned that so we…

TVD: Do you see that both male and female are having the chance to be in sports?

MNC: Yeah, both male and female have...

TVD: Are there any differences?
MNC: For soccer I think girls were not into it, but they were playing badminton, volleyball, rope climbing and running for the race.

TVD: Did you attend the race for running at that time?

MNC: Yeah, I remembered to be in the race that ran 100 meter, I made it in 13”. How strong by that time! I was fascinated with ping pong, too.

TVD: Besides sports how were your social life and pleasure with friends during the time you were in high school?

MNC: We had girls and boys in school, and we were playing hard with no fear at that time. Later on I did not pass the second test from high school, and I had a cousin studied agriculture he told me to study that major then I took the test to go into agriculture and ended up teaching it.

TVD: What did you study?

MNC: I selected animal profession that was to become a veterinarian. I studied veterinary in general. I graduated in 1968 and taught until 1975. I still continued after 1975 because Viêtnamese Communist did not bother me even though they knew that I was a wife of an American. They knew my profession was technical technology. I thought that I worked to raise my children and disregard the heavy prejudice of Viêtnamese Communist toward me. I writhed but still had to do it.

TVD: Before talking about that time, let talk about the 60’s decade, did you see what ideals that the young people have and how did it mean toward the country or the war during that time?

MNC: That time in the 60's decade I still went to school, I also saw the fighting movement and my relatives went to join the army. I only knew that personally but nothing deep in political world, only seeing the soldiers fighting with Communist. I remembered I had two brothers worked for American people as translators during that time. They served in America special force, and they used to go operating with America military. They came to places like Quâng Ngâi, and I was really worried for them. They just finished school and became translators at that time, I loved them and I clearly acknowledged that the Communist tried to invade the South Vietnam.
TVD: Besides your two brothers participated in the war. Were there any other members in your family participated in the war anyhow?

MNC: That time there were only my two brothers, I did not remember clearly. Oh there were some other friends of my brothers joined the army. They were in the special force

TVD: Did you have any contacts with American or American soldiers at that time because you lived in SàìGòn during that time?

MNC: Yeah, the time I lived in SàìGòn my parents went back to Nha Trang. Sometimes American soldiers came to my house when my brothers went to soldier’s operation at Nha Trang. My mother had a contract to cook and sell food for one American club. She cooked at home and brought food to them. Their meals were very high quality. When my brothers came home, American soldiers also came to visit. I had a good memory about American people which I could never forgot how much they satisfied for us. I remembered that was on a Christmas night I went to Church and we usually sang the song Silent Night in Vietnamese. I saw an American soldier at Church as he knelt down and cried during the Mass, I was in tears when I saw that. How hard it must be for him to be away from home! My heart went out for him and my tears still came down whenever I thought about that. When I came here I felt even deeper to learn about American life that Christmas night was very important for family to be together, and that song was so touching and meaningful so that memory was always in my mind. I never forgot it that each time I thought about that I was in tears.

TVD: Did you know how to speak English by that time?

MNC: Not much but I could speak a little. I learned English in school of course, and my brother’s friends came over, and I tried to practice with them.

TVD: You said earlier that your mother cooked for American at home, so was it Vietnamese food or American food, hamburger or how was that?

MNC: My mother cooked for the club in the airport, and she cooked Vietnamese food, but she was getting a contract to cook a very high quality food for American leaders, more than other soldiers because they worked hard to train those soldiers. I remembered every morning they had milk coffee and Páte Chaud, and half of a
chicken for lunch or a big piece of tuna. They had very high standard to be served by all kinds of Vietnamese food such as fried fish, fried chicken or steak and not just fish stew or something… Those quality dishes served American soldiers to help us fighting against Communist.

TVD: Did you have to help your mother in your family?

MNC: (smiling) That time I studied far away, I only came home once in a while. I helped my father with the laundry and delivered food down to the beach for the Navy. There was someone already helping to cook and deliver food in a big tank for the Navy. Being a big girl in the family, I helped my mother here and there sometimes when I came home from school.

TVD: Did you say earlier that you went teaching after graduated in 1968?

MNC: No, I went to higher school after graduated in 1968 and went teaching after graduated from there. That time the agriculture career opened to train people how to plant, taking care of animals, protect environment, those professions school called agriculture, forestry and animals high school. They taught students to learn knowledge of high school as the same time as learning professional knowledge. They graduated with the agriculture, forestry and animals profession as the same degree as high school students who passed both graduation tests. After that they could continue their study for any profession such as engineer, professor, lawyer, doctor… it just like the general education degree.

TVD: Were you married by that time?

MNC: Not yet, during the time in school, there was a friend of my brother came to my house; I did not pay attention to him because I was still very young. He went to the famous Vietnam Army Training in Đà Lạt while my brother became a translator soldiers. He became my husband later on.

TVD: His name was...

MNC: His name was Vũ Tiến Tư.

TVD: During that time of dating, did you have opportunity to go out or get to know each other?
MNC: He was actually my brother’s friend at Đà Nẵng, even though my brother transferred to Nha Trang, he was still in Đà Nẵng, but he kept in touch.

TVD: Did he write letters or how?

MNC: Yeah, writing letters, but that time I did not know if we were in love or not. Our letters were all about un-related things like what was going on here and there (smiling). Until 1968 I graduated and he graduated before then went to the battlefield until 1996. We got married in 1970, and had my first child in 1973.

TVD: When you were approaching to marriage he had to go to the war, did you need to follow the traditions? I heard many people telling that…

MNC: Before marriage he graduated and went to the battlefield, had many fights with the communist, but later on he came back to the army corps so he planed to marry. That time I was teaching at Phan Rang and came back to Nha Trang. He was from there to go back, too! My parents came home from Đà Nẵng, too. We got married and went our separated ways. He went back to the battlefield and I went to Phan Rang, we were not so closed together at that time.

TVD: Where did your married ceremony at? at Church or…

MNC: Actually our married ceremony was having a little obstacle about religion. My father had to convert to my mother religion before, and he was really into that religion, so he thought that his daughter had to marry a person with the same religion, I had to follow this tradition. That was the prejudice from older generation, and my husband family was Buddhism and they were really into their religion, too. He was the oldest son in the family at that time, so I thought that it must be hard for him to convert, and I told him that I would not want to marry him if he did not get approved from my parents by not converting to my family religion. I would have no choice but obeying my parents. (I actually learned that he had an older brother who joined the North Communist.) I thought that I could find other man if I could not marry him, but I could not find other parents as my own parents. Finally he went to religious process while station at the army corps and had a baptism certificate (smiling) to send home for my father and got my father blessing. Poor him! That time I did not know why I was so tough on him, but I actually did not want my parents to be unhappy with my marriage. I thought if I
did not marry him, it was ok to marry another man. His family came to my wedding ceremony at Church, but I knew that his mother was not pleased since she did not have a choice. She only wore a so-so Vietnamese dress at Church, but she wore a beautiful Vietnamese dress at home during the traditional ceremony. (TVD: Smiling). However, my husband family was very nice. I still kept in touch with my older and younger sister-in-law at San Diego, they still loved me dearly and that was my comfort to raise my children.

TVD: Did you have the reception at the restaurant after the religious ceremony?

MNC: There was no restaurant reception at the time. We cooked at home with the help of our neighbors. They lent us chairs and tables so we could eat together. We did not have gifts like money from friends by that time. They gave us a set of glasses, chopsticks or bowls but not money, so we had to take care of everything in the wedding reception.

TVD: What kind of food did you treat your guests? Were there any special dishes?

MNC: That time the mix salad was considered tradition, then the soup. I asked my younger sister-in-law mother to cook that. My younger sister married before me and her mother-in-law was in SaiGòn. She came to our house to be a main cook for us because she cooked western dishes very well. She cooked soup, seven courses of beef, chicken salad, roast chicken… in general I remembered that my brother had to come to American store to buy a long piece of beef fillet with the US stamp on it.

TVD: How many people attended by that time did you think?

MNC: I thought that was about sixty or seventy, relatives and friends, it was also too many already (smiling). That was so much fun, cutting cake and eating food, and they left after done eating.

TVD: After the reception, did both of you have to live at other place?

MNC: My wedding ceremony was in the morning at the Redemptionist Church in Nha Trang which closed to my house, and after that we had the traditional ceremony which bowed to our ancestors of the two families. That was the most important ceremony for my husband family. We treated our friends that night at
home because that was the war time so my husband had to come back to the army corps. We did not even have our honeymoon. After the wedding he stayed a few days and headed back to the army corps. That was almost New Year by that time. I had a memory after our wedding, my husband prepared to go back to his station, and we drove to the airplane on our Yamaha motorcycle. I was sitting in the back and he turned his head while talking to me and we got into an accident by a cable which dropped right on him and threw him down, then me too. Our legs and hands were all scratched. He still had to go after the accident and could not stay back. We had to call our family to take him to the airport to be back on duty. That time was before the Monkey Year so we scared of the Communist bombing that we had to hide for fighting. That time I went back home and there was an idea crossed my mind as my husband family went back to Đà Nẵng, I had to make some changes toward my in-law family because they thought that Catholic people did not respect and take care of parents and older generation. Actually Catholic prayer always included parents, older people and people who passed away. I wanted to dissolve that thought from my in-law family, so I bought my airplane ticket from Nha Trang to Đà Nẵng by myself. I knew that my mother-in-law liked altar and worship ancestors, so I went to the market and bought a whole stall of banana, big and nice to put on the altar, I also bought a bunch of beautiful layon flowers and a big beautiful branch of peach flower, and they allowed me to take them all on the airplane. I telegram my in-law and they came to pick me up. I had one sister-in-law married one month before me and another younger one still studied in university. Vietnamese New Year preparation was part of family activity of course so I worked together with my younger sister-in-law to clean up the incense burner, the doors and other things around the house. I even climbed up to the altar to clean the Buddhist statue just to show my natural self. That was the first New Year that I spent with my in-law family and doing things together with them. I wanted to show them and my husband how I was. On New Year they had an anniversary of our grandfather so they cooked vegetarian diet. Actually during the time I studied at Sài Gòn each time I came to my friend’s party, I especially went to the kitchen to observe how people cook to learn for myself. I loved to cook and making clothes. So I helped my mother-in-law cook for the anniversary, after she done I put food out to the dishes get ready for the worship. I went to the temple with them too even they did not say anything, but I thought they were already dislodged the prejudice of having a Catholic daughter-in-law (Smiling).
TVD: Did you have your first son after a year of married? He was

MNC: He was Vũ Tiến Tùng. About two months after our wedding, I went to my husband station to visit him. He lived in a soldier barrack in a small room which had two little beds. I stayed with him in that room because maybe they knew we were married so they gave us that privacy. After coming back from that trip I continued my teaching, and I was passing out at Church one day only to find out I was pregnant. I told my family about my good news while still teaching at Phan Rang and my husband tried to move to Phan Rang to live with me. We rented a very small room, smaller than this room. I continued to teach and he went to work at Phan Rang. I worked only sixteen hours per week, and took care of my child and family. I had another helper for my child by that time, too.

TVD: So you still going to work and teaching?

MNC: It was good at the South at that time for me to have two months off for maternity leave. I gave birth around New Year time which was in February, and I was off from work for March and April. Until May it was almost summer time, so I asked for more time to stay off the next three months for summer. It was cheating a little bit (smiling). I lived at Nha Trang a few months with my parents, and my husband also drove down to visit me. I had to come back to accept my new work at Phan Rang and my parents wanted to take care of my son because they were worry that the weather at Phan Rang was very hot and the wind there always got lot of sand and dust in it. I left my son there with my parents and visit him weekly. I finally took him home when he was a little bit older. I worked there until 1973 and had another girl.

TVD: How were your responsibilities changing as a working mother after having your second child? Was it more difficult?

MNC: Of course I felt more heavily when having the second one. I hired a helper there to stay at my house to take care of everything at home, so I only went to work until getting home and continuing to work things at home. Life there was very poor especially for children while parents were out to work! I remembered I had a memory of my second child’s pregnancy that time the Communist always struck and bombed our area. I lived nearby the police station, and we had two iron beds put together to sleep. I had a hard time during my second pregnancy that I wanted
to duck down under the space between the two beds for my safety when the bombing happened in despite of my pregnant stomach. That was the worst time in 1972, and it was around the hot fire summer which students could not go to school and had to stay back home. The bombing was continuing during 1971 and 1972, people died daily including the Vietnamese Communists because of the bombing. The whole city was distressing of the bombings.

TVD: Did you see that happened by your own eyes?

MNC: I saw that and heard that on the radio, and I also had a small television to see those happening, the battlefield was so bloody. I saw my husband in deeply thought after came home from work. That time he worked at the army office even though he fought at the battlefield before, but seeing our small children he had to stay still. He used to go outside to check and became very worry about the spreading of more and more from the Vietnamese Communists.

TVD: Where did your family live until 1975?

MNC: We still lived there until 1975. In 1975 my in-law family, my older and younger sister-in-law came from Đà Nẵng to Cam Ranh by train, then from Cam Ranh came straight to Phan Rang by bus, they came back that time and met us there. They wanted to continue to move out of there because the Vietnamese Communists stopped them in each station along their way. The Communists already stopped them at Long Khánh by that time, and each of the stations, they could not go straight from Huế to here. My sister-in-law told me that we could rent out a small boat to go out by that time since the city of Phan Rang was not yet in the hot battle. I had to leave and I still saw my students went to school on my way, but I had to go. My husband refused to go and said that he needed to be there to get ready for the battle. He could not leave like that. I went with my two children and my in-law family. We were only women and children at that time. My older sister rented a small boat to go together. That time people in Đà Lạt ran down to Phan Rang, they carried pigs, chickens and everything they could bring with them. They could not go straight from Đà Lạt to Sài Gòn because the communists cut right on the road in Long Khánh. They came there and stayed at the Church patio together with their pigs, chickens and ducks, whatever they brought with them. We bought some ready to cook food like pork stew and bread for my children to eat on the
boat. That morning we got on the boat at Phan Rang, most of us were women and children, only one or two men who were our in-law relatives. When the boat left shore, there were some soldiers wanted to get on our boat, they ran along our boat from the sand station to shoot in order to get our boat stopped for them. The boat was shaking too hard that my children kept vomiting, and I was panic when I saw blood from their vomit, but it was watermelon that they ate earlier (TVD: smiling). We did not know what to do at that time, so we went back and stayed over night for the children to rest. We wanted to go the next morning because the soldiers wanted to escape along with us.

TVD: Why your husband did not go with you by that time?

MNC: Because he had to stay back for work. He could not leave because his responsibility and he said he came later. We left the next night and I remembered we went for two nights and two days on the sea. Our life was like a tiny thread on the bell which was deemed and unknown. I never thought of escaping like this, our boat was like a little leaf floating on the ocean, we only saw the death end with no sign of life, not even knew where we were going. We were not even known our way around, after two days we finally ended up in Vũng Tàu. I brought a Honda with me because we went by boat. I carried some personal stuff with me when we arrived to Vũng Tàu, and my in-law did not carry anything. That time my in-law said whatever we could bring along, just brought them, so my friend’s family had a pharmacy, they brought their stuffs with them too. At Vũng Tàu…excused me…I could only lied down to the sand without feeling anything around, that time I just followed my family to take a bus to Sài Gòn. Sài Gòn was not loose to the Communists by that time, and we went by the sea to avoid any battle on the road. I came to my father-in-law house that time. He had a big building which rented out to American family, so he had enough space for all relatives to stay included my family. Later on we learned that my husband came back to his office to find out that was already gone and no one left there. He finally went by the road with his personal stuffs. He arrived at Sài Gòn after two days. We did not know where he was at that time. There were a group of people came from Phan Rang to Sài Gòn after two days, we met when his clothes was torn apart. The Vietnamese Communists slowly won over Sài Gòn on April 30th we all scared to death and threw away all nice clothes and anything nice things. That time I asked my helper who was a relative that if she had any old clothes that we could borrow to wear.
We were so scared that we wore bad and ugly clothes and dare not to wear our old nice clothes any more. Later on I thought what I was going to do now? At that time the Communist was not into our work yet so I told my helper that she could make the rice cake and I could sell it. At first I sold only rice cake then sweet rice and I made some money by spread out my little business. I remembered I just got my salary of nine thousands and used that money during that time. I contacted my school and that time I received my salary from them. I used that money to live until the day that new government called up all soldiers and people who worked for the former government to register. Actually that time we all scared because they lied to people. They said all officers, lieutenants were going to be educated for a week and all sergeants and soldiers were going to be educated for a month. Many people were hiding, they did not want to register but I was scared so I told my husband to honestly register. He went for a month, two months, three months and I did not even know where he was. After a few months, I received a letter which said “The government was very generous to former soldiers and let them be trained until someday when they were ready to go back to the family.” That was the only thing I knew but never aware of where my husband was. Later on I received a letter from him to tell me trying to go to the new cultivated place which meant escaping out of the country, and tried to find my younger sister who lived in America by that time. Those were the slang words from my husband. When things settled in, my in-law family went back to Đà Nẵng. We bought the cigarette from the owner of the Pasto pharmacy to resell it. That time the education camp was not starting yet. I drove to Khánh Hội, which called Bình Tây market before, to get the cigarette. I continued to sell one box after another and saved lot of money out of it. That cigarette supposed to take back to the middle province but it was not possible at that time, so the owner had to leave that at SàiGòn, he sold only to get back his investment. I also had a relative from my husband family he had a pharmacy and could not distribute his medicines so I took them and sold to other pharmacies. I thought about the saying that when you were hungry even your knees had to figure out the way. When our cigarette business ran out, my husband began his re-education camp. I had only the last two ounce of gold to give him but he did not want it at all, later on I used that for my son’s circumcise. That was done right away here when people gave birth, but it was not like that in Vietnam. I saw my life in Saigon was struggled each year working from sun dawn to sunset even though I still got help from my helper to take care of my children. I got used to the life in a small town
which I could involve very much in my children activities. I did not even know what my children learned in school here, so I hardly decided to go back to Phan Rang. I contacted a couple of friends and prepared luggage for my kids, and I wore an old Vietnamese style shirt to come back to Phan Rang. I came to the office for registration to get back my work. I thought that even though I worked in a small town making less money, but I could be closer to my children. I could take them to school, picked them up and took care of them daily at home. I was afraid that they could be worst in the big city. I took my two children back to register in the old town and met our friends who stayed back. They talked about people there who supported the communist during the war time and told me who took over power. When I came back to the school gate, there were a couple asked me if I knew who currently in charge of the school, I answered that I knew that was Mr. Lan, and that was why I came back to register for my service at school. They finally gave us a place to live because before 1975 I lived in the military barrack, so when I came back they gave me back my furniture like our beds, desks which they took from me when I left. My new apartment was on the top level which had three big rooms: one for single teachers, the middle one used for classroom which was big and empty. That time I found some chairs and spread a sedge mat to make a bed, but it was very cold at night, my children and I had to hold each other tight to get warmer. Everybody said that year was very cold maybe because the open relationship through the North. I had to find pot, pan and wood to cook, and carrying water from the well to the top floor to use. I bathed my children in a wash-tub, and poured water out of the window in the back. We ate and slept in the same area, slowly I found beds and we got divided that space more to give space to many other people. That time I worked in the cultivated department and the education department controlled everything there, so they made that place into a dorm. Students from other counties came there to study for a quick training so they could go back to their locals. I still taught there and served my students. I was actually nervous in my teaching while people there looked at me with hatred eyes. My husband was a soldier/officer in the former government so even my kids when they played with other kids, they told my children that: “Your father used gun to kill people, so when you grew up you also killed people even by knife.” Oh my God! It hurt me so much. I was so mad and hit my children, he was only five and he ran out of the school gate. That time I was crying and told myself I would never hit my children again. I was reflected upon that at home and it was not his fault
why did I hit him. Since that time I never hit my children anymore, I became silent and tried to live my life there. My salary that time was only thirteen kilo of rice which mixed with cassava, yam and wheat, and that standard was only cover for my self. My children did not have that standard because they were the children of former soldier. I could buy 3 meters of fabric per year with the standard price, and my children were not qualified to buy that. Luckily that I still had some money saved from the business I had when I lived in SaiGon. My children and I had to dig up the soil around school whatever soil we could dig up we planted vegetables like funnel for our food. We also raised some chickens they gave us eggs to eat. I was touch by my students when they saw me digging the soil they jumped in to help. When one of them became principal, he made me became the assistant principal of that school. We only had that position around two years until the situation settled in we would be replaced by the North cadre. They would be leading everything there. They built houses for cadre and workers to live, and I was qualified to get one. After my daily work in school I went to the market to buy ingredients like banana, coconut, jackfruit, a bunch of white radish with sugar and sweeten. I cut bananas, dredged coconut, mixed with sugar and put into a small container to make ice cream. I gave it to my kids to sell at school while I was teaching. It hurt deeply in my heart. At night I cleaned and washed carrots and radish, cut and put them into a very big jar mixed with salt, sugar and a can of boiled rice water, which I asked the chef that time when he cooked rice for the whole staff, he took out a can for me. A few days later, it became pickle and I started selling to all my staffs in school. I did everything to make money. I had a sewing machine that they gave back to me after I came back from Nha Trang which my parents left for me. I used that to sew my students’ clothes because their pants were worn out after they sat long time at school, and repaired the big or long pants to fit. I earned some money by that way besides selling ice cream, pickle, repairing clothes or anything that I could do. That time all students had standard of living, they had extra rice if they were not there each week or they had a standard of 50 grams of seasoning powder or coupons. If they did not use it they sold out, so I secretly bought them. I bought rice for my children to eat or re-sell, and bought coupons with a cheaper price and re-sold. It was good for students to have some money right away and I made profit. For the coupons, each person could buy ½ kilo of meat with the standard price at the government market, I used to make acquainted with workers at the market so I could use the coupons to buy meat sometimes for my kids to eat a good meal. I
told them to sell meat for me using the coupons and I shared a little profit with them (smiling). Many times the group leaders knew about that, they called me up to review. They asked me why I was a cadre teacher and doing business here and there like that. I told them right there that the government policy only allowed me to buy 13 kilos of rice, and there were only few kilos left since 50% of the rice was mixed. I had two kids without any rice or standard of living, how did I earn money to buy rice for my kids? I accepted the review from them and however they wanted to punish me, but I did not know a better way to do it. The first concern was about staffing which meant to be considered for being added to the cadre staff members. My friends who did not have any relationship with the former army, who they called quisling troops, they slowly considered to let them became members. That time everybody wanted to be a member, but they did not let me in. Every time that happened, they called me and said: “You tried to strive, you did not meet the standard, tried harder next time.” I was very angry, I cried every time like that. I was so angry of why they put me so down even though they were using me. They let go all teachers who taught Literature, History and Geography for general education and related to quisling troops. My specialty was about science and technology which they needed so bad to train the next technicians. They used my knowledge! There was the third time they considered me and I told them that they didn’t need to do that I could tell them straight that didn’t matter how many times, my mind still the same. Even though the fact that I worked with them, pouring my brain and abilities to pass down to my students and the next generation, but my political ideal was the same, nothing changed whether they let me be in as a staff member or not, it was not necessary. I gave them the straight answer like that because if I was too afraid toward the communist, they pushed me into the corner. I had to do something at that time to drive out, blow it up! They never talked to me about being a staff member ever again. I accepted that and gave them straight answer about that issue. Later on they were soften with me by inviting teachers to talk about the role of teacher in the advanced socialism, and suggested that I would be a model representative. Before I gave a speech I told them straight that the pride they gave me to be a model teacher was actually the point how I got this far. I worked without afraid of the leaders and the staffs but only afraid of my abilities were not enough to impart my students. I was scared that the peer pressures from outside influent on my abilities, but I tried with my determination. I had to work up with my brain and my heart only to impart my well-known knowledge for the
students. I wanted to show them that I was not trying to become a model teacher because of the leaders and the government policy, I said that without fearing, but I only afraid that my abilities would be lesser and lesser. I said that my students were my main motivation. They knew that I had a firm head when people pushed me in the corner, I poured out everything inside. I worked for many years while having many side jobs. I raised pig and chicken, my students helped me to make a pigsty and my children, who were only 7, 8 years old, also helped me to carry water from the well to wash the pigsty. I had a sow raised for breeding that time and some cadre wife said that:” looked at Mrs. Nga, she was happily living a debauched life before”, they thought that being a wife of a former officer was doing nothing but debauchery, but now she could do anything. I did not say anything. Pardon me that sometimes they were also spreading the rumor that wearing underwear made in America which had nylon was created uterus cancer, so they only wore fabric underwear. However, I was still better than them. My children after school in the afternoon, they went to the field to gather some un-plant vegetable so I could cut and cooked them to feed the pig. My morning chores were cooking for my children breakfast, feeding the pig then taking my kids to school, and teaching the rest of time. Many times when I was eating, I had to check the pig to see if it was eating well. I worried it would be troublesome if it skipped the meal. There was a memory of the day when my breeding pig gave birth and they were running everywhere in the pigsty. I stripped and it hurt so much that I screamed and cried. It was not physical pain but it hurt deeply in my heart because I was at the bottom of my life (crying). They pressured and watched me even in my meals, what I ate. I raised chicken and fed my children with the eggs I even brought to the market to trade for other things. When my kids wanted chicken, I had to sneak out to boil the chicken for my kids to eat. We had to hide inside the house to eat without letting anybody saw it. They knew my background that I kept in touch with my sister in America, they made me recorded and asked me if I got support from America, many things like that, but I did not care about that. I did everything to have food on the table for my kids. I watered my vegetable garden in the morning, cut a few bunches and boiled to eat and fed the left over to the pig. The painful memory was when I fell and that was a little happiness to raise the first breeding pig, I could buy an ounce of gold to save for my kids’ education. I made ice cream and my children sold it for many years while I already had sponsor document by that time from my sister in America. She actually sponsored us right
in 1975. Until 1978 I received the notice from police officer that my family got to go to America among 165 families, they also notified my family in Sài Gòn, too. We were so afraid when the police officer came but they told us that our names on the list of 165 families to go to America. They told me to do the paperwork, and I did not know what to do since I lived in Phan Rang, my other sister lived in Sài Gòn, and my whole family lived in Nha Trang. That time they were not having enough offices in most counties to do that kind of paperwork. I did not know how to do it, so I could not go by that time because my sponsor document got late, and we did not go to America until more than a decade later. My family turned in the sponsor document to get their Visa in the early 1980s, but I was afraid and did not turn-in mine. I scared of the fact that if I still had my jobs to raise my children when I turned in my document. My process got delayed with that thought. Until 1981-1982 I finally turned in my document because my family urged and concerned about me since they already done that earlier. I got the respond from my paperwork a year after turned in to my county Phan Thiết. My trouble was when I submitted my document at the county, they told me to turn in the paperwork to show that I was already off my work. I came to school where I worked to tell them what I needed they told me that until the county accepted my sponsor document, they would signed me off from school. Both parties made it so difficult for me just to force me to stay back. I finally came to the county and told them that the school did not want to sign me off from work. They had to accept my paperwork so I could get signed off from school. They told me again to get sign-off from school first before they accepted my document. Finally, I told them that they had to accept my paperwork if they did not do it I came to Sài Gòn because that was my life! So the county finally accepted my document and sent back to me after a year. There was a teacher, Mr. Lam, who was a long time teacher there and had a similar situation as mine he got the respond from them that:” The cases of Mrs. Nga and Mr. Lan, who were the teachers of science and technology, we needed them and could not let them go. If they wanted to continue their work, we gave them the opportunity to be in the production fields.” That meant they sent me to the farm, and worked directly at the farm as taking care of it, Mr. Lan had to go to the field and I had to take care of animal cages at the farm. They gave us opportunity to go back to our home town if we wanted. I thought of what I should do while my mind was already set that I did not need to stay with them. That meant I wanted to go off and they did not let me, so I wanted to stop working for them. I could survive
outside with any kinds of work, I was not afraid that I would die of hunger. I decided to resign and they notified me that I had to go back to my home town at Nha Trang. That time they did not let me stay in school any more, I had to look for the house to stay in the neighborhood, but the authority did not accept my application. They asked:”Where was your husband, you had to tell me where he was” I told them that they managed my husband when he was in the re-education camp and did not even let me knew where he was. Actually I went to visit him twice while he was in re-education camp. The first time he was in Hóc Môn, unit L19, and the second time he was in unit 3130A at Song Bé, Phước Long. We had contacts through letters and he had to fake his writing sometimes. For example this time I went to visit my husband, and of course he came out while his friends who did not have a visit that day, they sent letters out to their families through us to let family knew what they needed and how they lived in that camp. They made some wood shoes and made a whole at the bottom to put the letters in and sealed them by a little rubber. They gave that to my husband and he watched for a chance to give it to me while we were talking. Since the police were going back and forth to watch us, I quickly put in my bras when I got it, and followed the address there to contact their wife and passed on the information. That was how they knew what their family needed. Until their turns, they would do the same for me, too. That time my husband’s brother from the North wanted me to go visit my husband, but he already transferred to other camp when I got there. The second time I went to visit him was on September 2nd 1977 and I told him about his brother visiting and my mother-in-law advised me to give him a watch, but my husband said that I should not do that since his brother was brain wash already. It did not matter if he was a family member, he did not think his brother as a real brother. That was the last time I visited him. He told me that he would be leaving by escaping the camp. I was crying to tell him to be patient and waited for a day to come back home, everybody would go home some day. I knew my husband was trained in political leader school and later station in the control center at Bình Định, that background was the reason for his terrible tortures. They did not feed him enough and it forced him to eat anything such as snake or snail to get some protein. Many time people saw him pushing the giant woods on the street. God knew how many punishments he had to suffer from the non-human communists. It was wicked that he could not bear with it. He said he planed to escape from that hell. Many times he was so emotional pressing in the camp that he could not stand it. He told me to prepare
and bring for him a compass, medicine and a few clothes when I had a chance. I
did what he asked for and thought that he would be hiding somewhere in the forest
or jungle after escaping. I left after that visit and before the next visit my sister-in-
law received a letter from him and his letter said that:”You told Nga not to visit me
because I already escaped.” I did not dare to visit him after that. I learned that he
escaped with two others, maybe those two already prepared. Later on I met a wife
of my husband’s co-escaper or his sister to look for a contact, she told me she got
there on the night they planed to escape, and they delayed it because of her visit.
They escaped the next night, the three of them left at the end of November 1977. I
could not get any contacts after I heard that from her. Back to my life I had to raise
my kids and must get permission to visit my husband every time so the communist
was not easy on me. The next year I came to Sài Gòn and found a man who was in
the same camp with my husband, he told me that my husband left that night
without any trace because if he got caught he already got shot. That meant his
escaping was successful, but I never heard any news from him. I did not know if he
died or still alive? (Crying). I had to accept the fact to work and raise my children
alone. After that the police came and followed me because they were afraid that he
came to meet with me, but they did that in fear. Actually I did not dare to say that
he escaped. They asked me later on why I did not go to visit my husband any more,
I said that they did not notify me so I did not go, but I knew he already left and I
had to stay back to take care of my kids.

TVD: What year was that?

MNC: He left on November 1977, I visited him the last time in September 2nd
1977. When I came back my students knew about my husband situation so they
treated me very nice and help me whatever I needed. I lived like that until 1980s I
turned in my application to go to America but they did not accept that. When I
came back to Nha Trang, they did not accept my family as residence there. The
local police kept asking me why I still here, they wanted to chase me out to Nha
Trang and kept coming to kick me out every few days. My son said:”Mom, today
Mr. Lan came to kick us out again,” I was so angry and came outside doing
business. I talked back to them sometime that:”What did you want now. I did not
have a home, my husband was in your hands and you didn’t even notify me where
he was. My children had no future. I wanted to go back to Nha Trang, and you did
not even give me the right to be residence there. Whatever you wanted to do with
me just do it. My husband was not here any more, you could shoot me now if you wanted,” that was what I told the local police there. I came to the police office to talk about my situation and they finally gave me the permission to go to the county. I told them that they had to let me know where my husband was so I could settle my life, and they decided to sign the paper that I could stay there. The local police could not kick me out any more. Phan Rang county before was a fearful county, it was the same with Thuận Hải county. Officers were very horrible, but they finally let me stay back. That time the relationship between Vietnam and America was established, so my sister slowly sending money to my parents, my sisters and brothers. She also sent me a letter telling me that she gave me some medical tools (the iron syringe kit) to work outside school. From that time I went around the neighborhood to cure pigs, goats, cows, sheep because I already trained to take care of animals like surgery, injection or castrated the pigs to make them grown faster. I worked on all those issues. People called me when the pig was sick or gave birth. I loved my job, everytime I cured the animal, I earned a lot of money. I also went to the cows camp which was more than 10 kilometers away when I got calls to help the cow gave birth. Many times I drove my Honda in the middle of the night leaving my children at home to help the birth of the animal, and I had to use my hands to take out the pigs or cows from their mother womb. I also came to the cows camp to treat them like immunization shot. Could you imagine my small body like this with the old shoes to jump in the cow barn with hundred of cows and excrements, I had to crawl in to give its injection. I had nothing to protect myself on the job, but I still did that and was not afraid that. I could die if they kicked me. That time there were some farmers who had some big cow barns. I offered them my service to take are of all sick cows at their barns with one condition that they bought for me a few female cows and raised them at their farms, I paid the cost of raising those cows. They loved my offer and even bought back my cows if I wanted to sell because they did not have to worry about sick cows any more. They let me raised 3 cows. I calculated 3 cows gave birth to 6 cows per year, and those cows would gave birth to more cows. I thought that if I could not go to America, I would have a full barn of cows from 5 or 10 cows I had, and my life here would be better financially. I did that and bought 3 cows within the first two years. That time there were some women, who their husband went to the re-education camps and escaped from the country after that, they told me:”why don’t you check out your sponsor document, who knows the process would get
better now so they would let you go.” I thought it was reasonable, so I went to apply at the Developing of Foreigner Affair which worked on the documents for people going to America. I told them about my situation and I was off work for many years. I wanted to know if I could go to America or not? I needed to know so I could settle my children future here. After a year they sent me my visa, oh my God! I was so happy to hold that visa in my hands. I knew that they could not keep me here any longer, and my whole family in Nha Trang already got their visas. I had the thought that:”I wish if whoever let my kids go, I am willing to stay back for that chance.” My children did not have a chance to go to the university even if they finished their high school here because they were the children of a former army officer. I’d rather be un-educated than let my children grew up without education, but the fact that I had education and my children could not. That time my daughter still in high school and my son just finished high school. I went back to school asking to stay in a small room at school, and that room did not even have toilet or bathroom, pardon me that we had to go out to the street to do it, and took the bath right at the well, cooked by the woods outside. I continued to cure the sick pigs, and doing the fabric business. I sold fabric and let people made payments, instead of paying 30 dollars right away, they could pay day by day until it paid off. That way I collected 36 dollars in total, so I made some money. I also went to a small market to sell fabric, and went to cure the animals when people called me. My life with my children was getting better by that time. I also got support from my in-law family, they sent me box of gifts after they came to America, and I sold them to make a better living. My life was financially comfortable at that time. Later on I received the notice to do the health check-up and went to America on January 16th. I came to Thailand on January 23rd and arrived to America in 1991. I came to live with my sister until now. My parents and brother came earlier and lived together in a condo. My younger sister knew our family was adding up, so she bought another house. She was our angel because she bought an expensive house in Santa Monica for my parents and brothers, sisters to live. She even looked for the nearby school like high school, college, and bus stations to UCLA. She never expected anybody to contribute any amount and took whatever anybody could afford to give her. She took care of the rest for the house. She did not have any kids, and her husband died later on, so she lived up for our whole family. She thought that was her responsibility to take care of the family since my parents satisfied for her abroad education even though we did not make her do that. That
was what I thought about her when I came here and did not know what to do. My two children were one in high school and one in college. I attended the program to renew my career and I learned to be the veterinarian again. The program was for two years, I did not know how to support my two children during that time. Even though my parents supported me for food, but I had to have some money to buy personal stuffs like soap, books or notice books to study. So I could not go to school for additional training. My first week I took the bus from Santa Monica to Los Angeles and walked about 10 minutes more to get to a sewing shop. I practiced to sew the assembly clothes, sewing piece by piece, and my first day I made 9 dollars. I was happy and little by little I was getting more than five hundreds per month. I had a friend who had a nail shop, and I asked my sister that I went to do nail, but my sister said that I needed license to do nail. She found the nail school and dropped me there to learn. I only paid 20 dollars and bought a tool kit of 175 dollars, total of 195 dollars. Since then I woke up early at 5:00AM to prepare breakfast for my children, and took the bus to school. In the afternoon I went to Santa Monica College to learn ESL on my bicycle. I had to take the test and so worry about not passing it, so I borrowed 500 dollars to hire a translator for my test. The translator told me that:”500 dollars was a lot here, it was hard to earn it, why did you learn a lot in Vietnam and only some vocabularies about nail here that you were afraid to learn”, she was challenged me like that, so I made lot of efforts to study days and nights until the day I took the test, I worried a lot and brought my dictionary with me to review. Every night my children and I studied. I studied about the creations of skin and types of skin, I studied about that before, but I must remember in English here. I took the writing and practice tests, and only passed the writing test. I had extra 10 points but not enough to make up for my practice part. I was so nervous and dropped my tools in my practice test. I was happy when I took the practice test two months later and passed. I went to work by bus by that time. I had my driver license after a few months here but still taking the bus. My daughter and my niece all worked in Santa Monica Hospital because we knew someone there. I bought a bicycle 30 dollars for her to go to work. She tied it in front of the hospital, and someone took it after she got off from school. She cried a lot and I comforted her. She finally finished school and my son finished college and learned mechanic too. My daughter finished business and learn something more in Valley, in Cal State Northridge. She married and had children. I worked about 4 or 5 years and people told me that it was better to be my own boss,
not too big. I found 3 more people to work together with me about 10 years in Hollywood. My children were settled by that time, after September 11 business was going down, so I saved money by not driving and paying for insurance, only my children did. Until 2000 my daughter married and I had to drive. My daughter lived in Dallas. She had kids and settled there. My son lived here and I still lived with my younger sister. I drove down here on Sundays to teach at Việt Ngữ Hồng Bàng, spent time with my children. He worked on Saturday, Sunday, Monday at ER from morning to late evening. My son took care of his kids on Saturday, and I helped him on Monday. That was how I lived my life, going out with friends sometimes and teaching Vietnamese every week. It was a lot of fun to teach and I did not want to lose our Vietnamese. If I did not do it how could I passed it on later, right? (TVD: Yes) I still have my dream to come back to Vietnam, the communist still there. I hope that our next generations still keep the treasure of our Vietnamese culture and traditions, and determine to come back to our home country to show that we still have home. I wish my people in Vietnam are not having a hard life any more, we must destroy communist because our people suffer too much. I went back to Vietnam two times. The first time, my former students before 1975 invited me back. The second time I went with Miss My for issue about Mother. I saw Vietnam still struggling in pain. Whoever said it was better, for me I did not see it maybe somewhere else. I saw people getting worse and worse, only people who corrupted having a good life. I saw a lot of places sinking to depravity. They were into luxury party I must say which cost around a month of our salary here. I see children of the communist officers who study abroad here drive expensive car like Mercedes, using LV purse now. I wonder where is that money comes from? I want to change that so does my husband generation, but we were so pity and shameful. I wish that our next generations must continue. That was all I could say, do you have any more questions for me, just go head.

TVD: I have one last question for you, and that is towards this project, to protect and maintain our community culture and history, what do you want your children, generations down to 100 years more, know about you as same as your messages to them later on?

MNC: I think that my children, grandchildren or next generation or former generation, all expect to maintain the best respect to our ancestors, great grandparents, grandparents and parents who shed so much blood to keep our
country Vietnam, and we wish our future generations will maintain our Vietnamese language, never lose our Vietnamese culture in any forms of life in the foreign countries. They should celebrate Vietnamese New Year every year by organizing custom and traditional shows about New Year and issue books, magazines and network to communicate among Vietnamese generations, so the younger generation knew about what went through from the former generations, especially what the last generation satisfied to protect and passing down Vietnamese culture for others to treasure and not losing them in the foreign countries.

TVD: Yes, thank you for your time that you spend and share with me today.

MNC: Thank you! I am so pleased to know you through Miss Lucy that I have an opportunity to express my hard time emotionally which I buried deep down in my heart. I want to contribute to your project to fulfill your dream and complete this work. We always want to work side by side with you and younger generations now. Even though I know the knowledge that you and the young generation have now is pretty good, I only wish to contribute a little toward your dream and expectation of this project.

TVD: Yes, Thank you.