Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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JD: My name is Jennifer Duong and today is May 4th, 2014. And I am going to be interviewing Thien Pham. We are at his home in Santa Ana, CA. And this interview is for the Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC Irvine. Can you state your age and your occupation?

TSP: I am 32 years old and I’m a software developer at Oracle.

JD: Okay, and can you talk a little about your educational background?

TSP: I was born in Vietnam and then--I was there for--actually, educational background since Vietnam or also in the U.S. as well?

JD: In the U.S.

TSP: Okay. I came here when I was eleven years old and then I attended Middle School and High School here. I went to Costa Mesa High School and afterward I attended UCI; got my B.S. in Computer Science from UCI. And then later on I went to Cal State Long Beach to get my Master’s in Computer Science.

JD: Okay, and can you talk a little about your experiences in school and how that--how it was different than it was back in Vietnam?

TSP: So actually in Vietnam the educational--the education system is very different than here. Everything they--they stress mainly on memorization. So they would make students remember a really long poem and make them recite the entire like--maybe like a page of poem in their head. And then they--the teachers though, if you don’t behave, if the students, if they don’t behave in class the teacher can use the ruler and ask the student to stick out their hand and they would get a
spank on the hand if they don’t do their homework or if they misbehave in class. Here, it’s--versus in the U.S. everything is--you don’t see any of that here. So, basically if the student misbehaves they just get sent to some detention center and it’s not--everything here is self-driven. The student has to be self-motivated. There’s no punishment--there’s no severe punishment if you don’t do your homework or anything.

JD: And do you see that--what are the positive or negative aspects, if you see any, in the way that education works in Vietnam?

TSP: I can see the--with the Vietnamese education they use the power of the whip to force students to behave or to do the homework. But then sometimes that can be against their will and it doesn’t like--they--so in a way sometimes kids they need to be forced to do something--to spend more time studying. Versus in the U.S. everything’s based on if their parents motivate them and if they somehow listen to their parents then it’s good, but then--it’s all--sometimes I feel that in the U.S. we have too much freedom and sometimes the kids they might use that to--they might abuse that system. They might not listen to their parents or their teachers. I see a lot of kids spending too much time playing video games instead of doing their homework or they go to school and don’t even bring their books or they don’t even do their homework and it’s just the punishment is not as severe so they sometimes they don’t learn from that. There can be a tradeback. In Vietnam, I know here, people always say about if you use violence then it might cause a negative impact on the child’s growing up later on. So that’s--but then I believe there should be some kind of boundary, some kind of--parents they should be allowed to somehow discipline their kids not too severe so that it will cause some major scar in their life, but they need to have some tool to help--to discipline their kids that’s all.
JD: And on that note, what would you consider positive and negative aspects of American culture just in general. From society to the media, what would you say about that?

TSP: I think—I like the American education system it’s just because it’s allowing kids to do everything on their free will. They can explore any area, any field that they like to do. Versus in Vietnamese culture parents usually have a major impact on their kids’ career. Usually you see most Asian parents they want their kids to be a doctor or an engineer growing up. So in the U.S., the kids growing up here they have that freedom. They like to explore any field that they are interested in. So, that can help. I know some people later on they wish that they can change their career path and do something else. Growing up at first my parents also wanted to be a doctor and go into medical, but I was pretty much against that. I was one of those rebellious kids and I just wanted to go into some other field. I don’t like it when my parents keep on telling me to do something so that’s why I went into engineering. But then now looking back I can see why they wanted their kids to be a doctor. I’m sure that life would be better off as a doctor, but then it’s also dependent on whether that person likes that field or not.

JD: And is there anything that you consider negative in American culture or society?

TSP: In American culture, you hear a lot of school violence all the time on the news, all these shootings and just all these tragedies that occur in high school. All these massacres going on. Sometimes these kind of—you don’t hear much about this in Vietnam at all or maybe the media, they don’t broadcast wisely, but in the U.S. sometimes all this media they spend too much time popularizing, talking about the news, making it really popular, making that person into a hero to some people. That will make people think—like to copy also that same act so that they can—they may feel like they want to top—they want to—maybe okay, I will do something even worse than what this person did so that they can be on the news and become popular. I think that’s also
because of the fact that they don’t get enough—sometimes there’s too much freedom that the kids they can just abuse it and do whatever they want to do. Just want to be on the news.

JD: Where do you think that having too much freedom comes from? Where do you think that that kind of belief—where do kids think—or are able to get all this freedom? Compare it for example when we were comparing education and parents disciplining their children. That also came up, having too much freedom. Where do you think in American culture that comes from?

TSP: I don’t think it has to do really so much with freedom. Probably most likely because we have too much policy, too much regulations. Right now if the teacher does something to the kid they can easily get sued for sexual abuse or if the teacher yells at the kid in any violent manner, they can get sued just for yelling at the kid, just calling the kid by names. It’s just—there’s just too much regulations in the school preventing teachers from having power or to discipline the kids.

JD: Okay, so more regulations. What you’re saying is it’s not that kids have more freedom, so to speak, but there are restrictions on teachers and people in places of authority.

TSP: Right.

JD: When you first came to—well, what year did you come to America?

TSP: I came here in 1993. So I was in the middle of my 5th grade at the time.

JD: Okay, and you came over under what program?

TSP: I came over under the Humanitarian Operation. It’s the HO program. Basically that program—any of the—actually my dad he was in the South Army. He got imprisoned for over four years. So anyone—any of the soldiers fighting along with the Americans back then that went to prison for three years or more, they can apply to that program and they can seek asylum in the U.S.
JD: And how was your adjustment compared to your parents’ adjustment in America given the generational gap?

TSP: Actually my parents they are very traditional so they--they are very traditional Vietnamese parents. Besides eating rice every meal, observing every major Vietnamese holiday, like Tet or Tet Trung Thu which is the Moon New Year, the Lunar New Year. We celebrate every major Vietnamese holiday and we have gio (death anniversary) which is commemorate the dead, our ancestors. They have very different opinions compared to how I view certain things. Like they--I’m trying to think of an example--when I come home they expect me to go and bow and tell them if I’m about to leave the house, they want me to go and bow and tell them, “Oh, I’m leaving the house.” If I’m coming back home they want me to say--to greet them when I get into the house. They are very traditional.

JD: So did that make their adjustment more difficult compared to yours?

TSP: A lot of times certain things I view--for me I’m over eighteen and sometimes I feel like they still treating me like a kid and I told them my opinions and a lot of times they always--it’s hard to explain to them. But I think--there are things, certain things that I don’t agree with how they view--they view it. I have to spend a long time trying to convince to them, trying to explain to them about certain issues. They always worry about how we, how I grow up and the kind of people I hang out with so.

JD: And speaking of the people that you made friends with, was it difficult for you to overcome the language barrier and the cultural barrier?

TSP: No, I’m a pretty easygoing person so it wasn’t hard for me to get along with most people. In high school, I have Vietnamese friends, I have Caucasian and Mexican friends, too. There are some people they are more judgmental so--usually, most of the time though I don’t have a
problem getting along with everyone. There was instances where I feel discriminated because one time, back when we first arrived here, we were walking home from church right and all of a sudden, we were walking home, that was before we had a car, we were walking home--the church was like two or three blocks away from our apartment. Then on the way home there was a car driving by and then there’s this--I think a group of Mexicans in the car. They were calling us names and they were, “Go back to where you come from!” I know some people they just not very respectful. They are just--a little bit extreme.

JD: Did you ever struggle with being accepted by peers in school whether that be in high school or college?

TSP: No, I don’t have any major problems.

JD: And, what about culturally, did you ever experience culture shock when you first came to America? As in you were very surprised about certain customs of America?

TSP: When I first came here--back when I was in Vietnam, back in 1993, there wasn’t any flushable toilet at all. So, in Vietnam, back in the old days, you go to--usually there’s a small outhouse in the back of the house near some--near a lake or something or a small river. So when I came here I didn’t know what a toilet was so I went to the restroom I see this bowl of water. To me, it was totally new. I grew up in Vietnam--they don’t have any of that. I didn’t know where to shower so when I come here I was still crouching on the--I didn’t know you have to sit down on the toilet seat so I was crouching on the seat and then I was getting water out of the faucet to use a cup to take a shower. I didn’t know there’s an actual place that you can go in and turn on--So, I was getting water out of the sink. It was totally new when I got here. Back in Vietnam, we didn’t have a car. Everything that people go around on motorcycles or bicycles. So, when I got here I feel it took me a day or…just to get used to being inside of a car. I remember one time I was in
the car and I got motion sickness from just--because I wasn’t used to it at that time. I vomit in the car. So, it wasn’t a good experience.

JD: And what would you consider--I mean you talked about all of these strange--what you considered strange things about America when you first came here. Is there any one thing that you would consider the hardest obstacle that you had to overcome in adjusting to life in a new country?

TSP: The hardest obstacle probably have to be the language, picking up a new language and in Vietnam, right--actually my dad, before arriving, before coming to the US, my dad actually taught us a little bit. He make us watch some videos on how to learn English and how to--he taught us basic--basic words like “Hello”, “Hi”, “Today’s Monday” or something. So me and my siblings we did have a--my dad did actually teach us a little bit about--a little English. But then still, the pronunciation and everything is all different. I remember one time my dad he went to--he was looking for a restroom at the airport and then he went up to this one lady--he was asking for a water closet. What he meant was restroom so the lady didn’t know what a water closet was. So, she just thought it was--she thought my dad was looking for a water fountain.

JD: And did you overcome that language barrier--did you take more classes when you were in American or did you just learn by speaking with other people at school?

TSP: Actually, at school at that time there was a lot of immigrant people so they have this program called ESL. I have to go through the ESL program and then--so basically whenever the other kids have their English classes I have to go to a special class and study ESL with other kids coming to the U.S. around the same time. So I was pretty glad after I went to it for--in sixth grade and then by the time I got to eighth grade and then I graduate from that program so then I was happy that I got to study English with the regular kids.
JD: And were all those kids from different Asian countries or were there just a variety of ethnicities?

TSP: It was mostly Vietnamese and Mexican in that program. So then they--every now and then at the end of the year they usually have someone--they test your skill level. If you meet the requirements then they can move you up to the next ESL level and once you graduate from that program, they send you back to the your normal English class.

JD: Did you expect America to be so racially diverse? When you first got here was it surprising to you or--?

TSP: No, actually in Vietnam--during my time, there wasn’t much--I didn’t get exposed to anything about--I didn’t know anything about America. I just know my parents just tell me all the time that America is just a wonderful place. Everyone want to come here to, you know, build their dreams and--so I just know that it’s a lot better than Vietnam, but I didn’t know how life was coming here. So I have no idea because there’s no TV at the time. At that time, TV was still in black and white and it’s very costly to own one and--I didn’t have much idea, I didn’t know that people were driving cars everywhere in America--I didn’t--actually when I first arrive at LAX and then I look out the airplane--before the airplane was landing--I look out the window I saw all this lights, you know, from the freeway--I had no idea they are from--they are cars--the lights from the cars. It was totally new to me. And you don’t see all this buildings--in Vietnam, everything’s small. During my time, you don’t see a lot of buildings so--any high rises.

JD: Did you--how do you think the different ethnic groups got along? I mean, you spoke about things that were shocking, surprising to you--what about the people? The different ethnicities or even the interactions, everyday interactions--what did you see were the difference in that compared to people in Vietnam?
TSP: I think in here, right, we have like--this is the--in here, the US is very diverse and in Vietnam you don’t see--sometimes you see foreigners, but then that’s--there’s not a lot of foreigners around so you a foreigner in Vietnam--everyone--you probably--you feel really special because, you know, since there’s a small number--and people, usually when they see foreigners, they always think, “Okay, they going to come, they have--they are really rich and they have a lot of money to spend.” So, in the US, you know, when people think of immigrants and sometimes they might have a feeling that they are here to take over jobs and some people feel like they job being taken over by minimum pay immigrants. I know some people they might get threatened by the rival immigrants so I think that’s also another factor why they--they don’t like--they have a--they don’t like people coming from here, over here too much. That’s also maybe because all this racial issue going on.

JD: And on that point, how do you think different groups get along? I mean, even at least in your community, different ethnic groups.

TSP: There always problems when you have people--when you have a large group of people even within the Vietnamese community. I always hear--my parents they watch the Vietnamese TV news station every day and I always hear--once in a while--I usually don’t follow along, but they--a lot of times they were watching something while we eat dinner and I just sit there and tune in with them. I see arguments within the community all the time. You have different organizations. For example, last year there was two different organizations that want to organize the Tet Festival so normally, usually they all have one--the Student Association, they are the one to host the festival. This year, there was another organization and they were fighting over who going to--they both fighting over this one place where they want to host that. So, there’s a lot of issues within the community itself, too.
JD: What was that organization?

TSP: It’s run by this former Vietnamese--officer. It’s run by this former Vietnamese activist. He’s very active in the Vietnamese community. And then the other one, it’s run by the Vietnamese Student Association--VSA. So they host the festival every year. It’s just they--it’s just sometimes different group, different people within the community they just arguing--they just have different opinions on certain issues.

JD: Within the Vietnamese community what are some of the issues that you think are often debated or cause a lot of conflict? What are those issues?

TSP: Actually they--I see, I hear a lot of protests all the time usually whenever--the Vietnamese here, they are very much against Communism so whenever any CD or any supporter of the Vietnamese Communist Party going on, they will go out there and protest. They love to go out there and protest. They don’t mind--they are used to organize all these protests before. I know recently the city of Irvine they sign some agreement, some agreement with the Vietnamese--with Vietnam--so they sign some trading agreement so they can better bond the relationship. So the city of Irvine want to establish some kind of agreement with Vietnam and the people here didn’t like it. So, if that agreement go through then they will have the Vietnamese flag on the--the communist flag at the city. People here they organize a big protest right in front of Irvine city just--they don’t want to see that heard around Orange County.

JD: Are there any other issues aside from the anti-communist sentiment within the community?

TSP: I’m sure there--but I cannot--I cannot recall any right now.

JD: Okay, and politically within the community. Does that kind of conflict come up as well in terms of conservative or liberal? What do you see about that within the community?

TSP: Like, I know they have like--they have representatives from the Vietnamese communities.
Certain people they run--they got elected to represent the Vietnamese community and I know there are some bad--they are argue there was some people like certain person over other people. So there was some disagreement going on, but I think that’s just normal when you have any kind of election. That’s just part of the politics.

JD: And, for yourself, do you vote in US elections?

TSP: Yes, I do.

JD: And why--why do you choose to do that?

TSP: Because I think that’s part of the rights as an American--U.S. citizen. That’s one of the given rights that--and I also want to vote on the certain issues or topics I feel--that I feel strongly about.

JD: What are some of those topics that you feel strongly about or support or do not support?

TSP: Recently, it’s the--gay marriage. I vote--I’m a Catholic so I voted against that. And then there were some other issues also have to do with--let me see--I’m trying to remember the last election. Like there are certain politicians that I want to be in office. So I feel that person probably would do more for the Vietnamese community so I tend to support that person. Oh, there was some kind of school funding too that was on the ballot last year. And then they wanted to raise tax to support--to put more money into education.

JD: And you voted--?

TSP: I voted “yes” on that.

JD: Okay. In the last election, the last presidential election, did you vote?

TSP: Uh, yes.

JD: And who did you vote for?

TSP: I, let’s see--I voted for Obama. And then--
JD: 2012.


JD: Why did you vote for President Obama?

TSP: Because I--that time I feel like he was doing--he was doing a--I didn’t have any issue with Obama, all the policies that he implemented so I--I just--I felt he was doing a good job--until he came out with Obamacare program I’m starting to doubt my--I’m starting to maybe shift a little bit away from supporting him.

JD: What are your--what do you see as the major issues with Obamacare?

TSP: It’s just--it’s very--right now it’s very vague for a lot of people still don’t know how that program going to help them. Beside that they have to pay for their own health insurance. A lot--they still need to know a clear understanding of what being covered and how they can benefit from that. ‘Cus I know for sure that I have to pay tax--I have to pay higher taxes now because Obamacare, but then--I don’t know how much of that money actually go into, you know, helping other people who doesn’t have medical benefits.

JD: When you voted for Obama, did you understand--did you know about his stances on certain social issues?

TSP: Obama, he’s--he want to change--he want to change the entire like--I know that he always say that he want to change the entire government and how it operates and--So, at that time I, you know, I just--I--like he’s a really great speaker so I was like drawn into his speeches. He stresses the--but I didn’t have a clear understanding--I just like--but yea, I didn’t have a very clear understanding of what he wanted to--what he wanted to change at that time.

JD: Mmhm. You mentioned that you’re Catholic. How important is your faith to your life?
TSP: It’s very important. To me--actually, not many--most of the people in Vietnam--the majority of people there are Buddhist. But I’m one of those rare one, you know. My dad, he used to be a Buddhist. He used to be very active in the temple. He used to be in the youth program in the Buddhist temple. Then after he got married to my mom he convert. So now, he’s very active at church. Actually, in my family, faith is very important to me. I grew up going to church every weekend. So it’s a major part of how I turn out to be today.

JD: And within the Vietnamese community in Southern California are there a lot of Catholic organizations that you are involved in within the community or is it just at church?

TSP: Actually, I--I go to St. John the Baptist Church in Costa Mesa and--so they--so I mainly--I’m very involved in that church. But once in a while I also go to the youth group at the Vietnamese--the main Vietnamese church. It’s called the Vietnamese Catholic Center. It’s in Santa Ana.

JD: Trung Tam Cong Giao (Trung Tam Cong Giao)?

TSP: Right, right. It’s called Trung Tam Cong Giao. So once in a while I do participate in some of the events that those youth group involve with. They have a lot of volunteering service like going to helping out at nursing homes or packing food for homeless people or going doing Christmas caroling at a nursing home. So I--once in a while, I do join that group.

JD: And within that Catholic, Vietnamese Catholic community--within the youth, is there kind of an upholding of culture, of traditional Vietnamese culture, within those groups as well?

TSP: Yes, so in that group they--usually when we go sing they sing a lot of Vietnamese. Some American songs, too. So they want to expose other people at the nursing home to Vietnamese culture. They sing songs in Vietnamese and also English songs, too. And then, they would also bring in food and presents. They would bring in Vietnamese food for those people over there.
And then once a year they also hold a concert where they perform Vietnamese dance—traditional dance. The girl would wear ao dai (traditional Vietnamese dress) the long dress. They would probably hold the cone hat. That’s very—when you think of Vietnam, you always—the ao dai and the cone hat are the two things that probably representative of our culture, Vietnamese culture. And then you see these girls wearing ao dai and cone hat dancing and then some of them would sing, too.

JD: Why do you think that specifically ao dai is representative of Vietnam or Vietnamese culture? That specifically?

TSP: Because in Chinese culture, they also have something similar, but then--they don’t—it’s not the long dress like the Vietnamese. I think only Vietnam is probably—we are known for the long dress and it shows—it’s very like—the dress it not revealing, but then also show the—it also show the--Somehow it show the beauty in the Vietnamese woman when you wear that dress.

JD: Why do you think that it is the beauty of the Vietnamese woman that represents Vietnam? It could be--

TSP: Everyone in Vietnam—when you go to school in Vietnam, especially you attend high school or college in Vietnam, the girls have to wear the uniform so they--the girls they are required. Most school they require girls to wear the long dress or white long dress uniform. So throughout high school and college. So then usually, you always see picture of Vietnam when…on the street you see girls on their bicycle—they bike on their bicycle with their long dress on after getting out of school. So it’s very—it’s a very common scene in Vietnam. And usually the guy they just have their own uniform. It’s just a shirt tucked in and black pants. But the long dress is—you see it everywhere in Vietnam. Like people—even here on special Vietnamese occasions, like holidays, people dress in that—you see people dress in that.
JD: And we were talking about the youth, the Catholic Vietnamese youth, and their upholding of the Vietnamese culture--how important do you think it is for youth, in general, Vietnamese youth in general, to uphold their culture?

TSP: I think--our Vietnamese culture is very rich. We have a lot of--when people think of Vietnam they mainly think about the Vietnamese food and we have a lot of good dishes. But then there’s more to it than just food. We have--beside the food, I love going out to Bolsa to--there so many restaurant there--just going out there and eat. The food are cheap and a lot better than--they cheap and healthy, too. But then there’s a lot more than just food. We also have many wonderful traditions and holidays. Like during Tet right--Tet usually--I remember I have so much fun in Vietnam during Tet. During Tet, usually on that day, that morning, we would put on our best dress and my parents would take us to our relatives and then we would go over and say a good wish to them and we would get a red envelopes right. And then not only that right--it’s the time for people--it’s the time for family gathering. Like I usually don’t see a lot of my relatives until that time. People come home. Doesn’t really matter what you do or how far you live. You probably want to be home just to get together and have a good time with your family. And then I remember during Tet, we have so much good food. You have the rice cake. We would spend all day eating rice cake and just gamble for fun. We take money we got from the red envelope and we use that to gamble just to test our luck and just--Not only that, but they also have fireworks and firecrackers. People would lit up firecrackers. The point of lighting up the firecrackers is to scare away all this evil spirit. So some people might not--it’s not just for fun. The sound from this firecracker supposed to scare away the evil spirit and bring you good luck for the new year. A lot of times when I was small, I would go around and just get--my family, we wasn’t that rich so we don’t have--my parents they usually don’t buy firecrackers. They think it’s a waste of
money. You just burn money if you just buy firecrackers. So me and my siblings we run around the neighborhood and we would pick up all of this unexpode firecrackers and we would use that and we would light up--or take out the powder from those crackers and then make ourself--and use paper to roll up a tube and then pour in that powder and make firecrackers ourself. It’s really fun. And then we also make rockets from those firecrackers and just use--roll up the paper and then use that powder and make a small rocket. Beside Tet, we have like the Lunar New Year, the Tet Trung Thu. There’s so many. And then we have lot of wonderful stories, like folklore story, about the Vietnamese culture. And I think a lot of kids here they don’t really care--they tend to not care too much about the culture as much. ‘Cus right now the best person that they should talk to their parents ‘cus they are the firsthand resource that they can go to and learn about all this richness in our Vietnamese culture.

JD: And speaking of those kids who--maybe some of them are not as interested in learning about their culture--why do you think that some children are just not very interested?

TSP: So they--I think most of the time they don’t see, they don’t get the importance, the values of some of this culture, of some of these traditions. And they--to them, it’s just another holiday or it’s just--they don’t see the real meaning behind it or they--I know a lot of Vietnamese kids they don’t even want to--they don’t even like to speak Vietnamese at home. So the thing--if they just do that then it will make it harder for them to communicate with their parents and their relatives, you know, older relatives over here doesn’t speak much English.

JD: And there are other kind of--certain things that are considered not going with the Vietnamese culture. For example, interracial dating or interracial marriage, to some very traditional people, is not--you know, it’s not exactly encouraged. It’s more encouraged to, you know, date or marry another Vietnamese person. What are your views on interracial dating or interracial marriage?
TSP: To me, I spend more than half of my life living in the U.S. So, for me, it’s not a big deal. But to my parents, though, they don’t want--my parents, they are very traditional so they don’t want to see any of us date a non-Vietnamese. So actually, my sister right now, she’s about to get married to a Chinese and my--to them, they would rather see her date some Vietnamese guy ‘cus it’s easier for them to communicate with the guy. If she was to date a Vietnamese then they can talk to him better. Sometime, it’s more the language barrier. So my parents though they--I know a lot of Vietnamese parents, too, they want their kids to marry a Vietnamese not--but then they also know that in the U.S--they also know that here is not the same so they cannot enforce that on the kids. So it’s just--so they right now, my parents they are learning to live with it and they trying to--and now, maybe my mom she is picking up a few like--her English is a little bit better. She learning a few words so that she can communicate--she can just communicate with the guy. But on general, my parents they want us to marry Vietnamese and it has to be Catholic, too. If the person is non-Catholic then my mom she doesn’t like it. To her, religion and Vietnamese is very important.

JD: Besides the language barrier--you mentioned your sister is about to marry a Chinese person--besides the language barrier, what kind of other things do your parents see as obstacles that have to be overcome when you marry a person outside your own ethnicity?

TSP: They will have a harder time getting to know the other family. So they--they will--a lot of times they want to bond with the other family as well. So it’s going to be a challenge for them to do that.

JD: Is your sister’s fiancé Catholic?

TSP: Yes, he converted--recently. So he--my mom told my sister that if he want to marry my sister then he have to convert. Otherwise, my mom will not agree to it.
JD: So did he take classes and get confirmed and everything?

TSP: Right. So he have to take Bible study and go through that process for almost two years. It’s very demanding.

JD: What is the religion of his own family?

TSP: They--they didn’t really worship. They don’t really have any religion at that time so--even though back then he went to a Christian school, but then he’s not a Christian at all. So he did have a background in Christianity, but then it’s not--it wasn’t a big deal for him to convert. He had knowledge of Christianity already so.

JD: How did his family feel about his conversion to Catholicism?

TSP: They--they don’t have a big opinion because they don’t really--it’s not a big deal for them.

JD: Speaking of faith, you mentioned to marry outside of your own religion is also considered not--it’s not exactly encouraged right? It’s not traditional, it’s not--

TSP: Actually my dad he used to be--his family--my dad’s family side they are very--they are Buddhist oriented so when my dad marry to my mom and he converted, a lot of my dad’s relatives they wouldn’t even attend his wedding. So they--they didn’t like the idea of him converting at all. So usually in the Vietnamese culture the wife supposed to follow the husband. So usually if you marry to--that’s the tradition. If you--if the wife marry the husband then the wife have to follow whichever religion of the husband. They have to go live with the husband. So my dad he converted so that idea just angered some of my dad’s relatives so they didn’t attend the wedding and they--for some time, they didn’t like my mom at all.

JD: And that was because your dad’s family saw it as him following his wife?

TSP: Right, right.
JD: And, in Vietnamese culture, kind of that dichotomy between the role of a husband and the role of wife or the customs of what you just mentioned--the custom of the man or the woman following the husband--what are your feelings about that?

TSP: To me, it’s--to me, I grew up here for a long--for more than half of my life so that, to me, that’s not important. I see as long as the two love each other they should be able to work it out. But the problem lie in whether they want is--the kids is the big issue. After they have a family, they need to talk over see okay--how the kid--what kind of religion they want the kids to follow. ‘Cus I know a lot of times--I know people who marry--the husband is non-Catholic, the husband Buddhist and the wife Catholic and in the end, their kids they just--they don’t follow any religion so they have no--they don’t have any moral. They didn’t go to any school to help them to develop their moral sense so--that’s usually I think--they have to work that out though. To me, not important, but then you have to work out and see okay what--what kind of--how they going to raise their kids later on.

JD: And there are other issues about the family--or I wouldn’t say issues, but differences in family life in America--in American culture versus Vietnamese culture. For example, many couples in America get divorced. Many couples don’t have children. What are your thoughts on that?

TSP: I’m sure in Vietnam we also have the same issues, too. It’s just it’s not very highly publicized. They don’t publicize these things at all in Vietnam. So I think this has nothing to do with whether you live in the U.S. or you live in Vietnam. It’s a very common social issue. So you are bound to--the thing is, if you have a good--if you have a good religious foundation where you are raised to value your marriage, then that problem will be less--you don’t see--now, I think now people turning away from religion and they--they are basically just atheist. They don’t want
to go to church. They don’t--so that--in a way, that will--they don’t see all this values in marriage. If you go to church or if you have a strong faith then you are teached to value all of this special--what do you call it--sacrament in Catholic. So marriage is a special form of sacrament. So you don’t--so you would definitely--once you have something, once you are bound to something special, you want to--then you will have to force yourself to work on it and resolve issues to overcome all these issues in marriage.

JD: The U.S. has a 50% divorce rate, one of the highest. Half of the married population, 50%, get divorced. Why do you think that the rate is so high?

TSP: I think that’s also because a lot of times people get married not for the right reason. They get married maybe because out of infatuation and then a lot of kids they get marry right after college without--they don’t have a deep understanding of their partner until after marriage. So it’s basically--if you spend--that’s why it’s maybe best to get to know--spend some time to get to know your partner, understand and seeing how you can live with that person for a long time. It’s not just--it’s just mainly they in it for the physical aspect not the true meaning of marriage.

JD: And you had mentioned that you really value your faith, you value your Catholic faith. And has that been a way for you to kind of be--connect with your community? Are there other ways, besides your faith, that you were able to make friends or connect with other people, even though I know that your faith is a very, very big part of your life?

TSP: I don’t think you have to be--I know people who go volunteer in events in the--I know people who volunteer at the Tet Festival that hosted by the Student Association. So you don’t have to be involved in any--in the church or in the temple to help out with the community activities. They always needs for people to help out with--to help out setting up. So that it’s not--
it’s not something that you--I don’t think you have to be in any--in a church or anything to help out.

JD: In your opinion, what do you think will become of Vietnamese culture in America in the future for generations to come as the generations, our generations pass, yours and mine? What do you think is going to become of that?

TSP: I think most likely our Vietnamese culture right now we--I think we will--I’m sure we have a lot of good traditions, Vietnamese tradition, so I think right now for me, I already try to emerge myself in two cultures so I think the kid--they will--they will learn these traditions from their parents or grandparents. They will--and then--not--a lot of the old thinking they tend to be more open mind. In Vietnam, everything you have to listen to your--to an elder--you have to listen to them, but now I think it’s more--now the kid--it’s hard to make people do what you said so--now it’s just--you have more freedom to do and just--to do whatever you want, but then at the same time you also, they also see the values in keeping some of the traditions. For us, when you think of Vietnamese, I’m sure a lot of kids’ parents they will still teach their kids to be respectful and--because that’s also in the culture. That’s very important in our culture. We need to be respectful of not just ourself, but also other people different ethnicity.

JD: What are the differences that you see between your generation, what’s called the 1.5 generation (born in Vietnam and came to America), and the generation of Vietnamese born in America, such as myself? What are the differences you see between those two generations?

TSP: For me--actually I--for me I still know--I still know a lot of Vietnamese music and traditions because my--I was raised in Vietnam--even though I don’t really like the Vietnamese--what is it--it’s called Cai Luong, I--it’s the Vietnamese--it’s the country music style. So because I know a lot about the folklore like the Trung sisters--they led the first resistance against the
Chinese invasion. I don’t know if you--the Trung sisters. And then I know quite a bit about the Vietnamese history and so--to me, I benefit from both--I know a lot of--I can easily read and understand Vietnamese. So I have no problem listening to a Vietnamese station and fully understand a lot of the jokes that they make. Maybe it’s harder for people who was born here. They might have a harder time trying to understanding the meaning behind it.

JD: What are the most important things that you think future generations of Vietnamese Americans should remember about their heritage or their culture?

TSP: The most important things I--I think it doesn’t matter--their skin can still be--even if they Vietnamese or even if they born here, they going to still have yellow skin and black hair (laughs). Even how Americanized they are--I think they still need to--they still need to--at least need to try to know--learn a little but Vietnamese and keep the language. The language is used as the doorway to the Vietnamese culture. I think you don’t know the language--basically, it’s harder for you to pick up on the culture. So at least they need to at least make an attempt to learn like some basic--understand, even though if they don’t like to speak the language. They need to know a little bit Vietnamese and--so that they can get the culture and just--just enjoy--it’s better to have more than one culture. Now you have like--there’s a lot of things--richness in your life.

JD: And your siblings were all born in Vietnam as well, right?

TSP: Right.

JD: And how many siblings do you have?

TSP: I have four other siblings. I’m the second oldest. And then--actually my youngest brother he came here when he was five years old so he pretty much--he attended kindergarten here, but he still can speak Vietnamese. My parents talk Vietnamese to him all the time so he can speak and understand Vietnamese. Even though he doesn’t like to speak--when I talk to my siblings
we—they like to speak in English better, but then when talking to my parents we’ll switch to Vietnamese.

JD: Do you have any memorable stories about your childhood in Vietnam?

TSP: I have a lot of stories playing around. In Vietnam, even though I live in the city, but then my house right in this—is right in front of a small lake and then there’s a lot of trees. I remember my house right behind my grandpa’s house. He has a big garden—he has all kind of fruit trees. All the tropical trees that you don’t find in the U.S. Usually I would in the afternoon—I would go around with the neighbors’ kids and then we would climb up all these trees and picking off fruits. And we make kites and go fly the kite in this field near our house. And we would go around just—just playing games with the neighbor kids all the time. That the thing about it—here, when the kid growing up in America they spend a lot of time playing games on the—or watching the TV. But in Vietnam I didn’t have any of that when I grew up so I just—I spend a lot of time outdoor and making all these games using whatever available to me—using branches or stick that—from the trees.

JD: And has that kind of carried over into your life now? Are you still very active and an outdoors person?

TSP: Right, maybe that also part of it because I was so active as a kid going—climbing trees and picking off fruits and now—maybe that’s why now I enjoy going hiking all the time. My house—we have a lot of fruit trees at our house, too. We have all kind of fruit trees—the typical Vietnamese trees like—the persimmon and the Chinese apple.

JD: Does your family have any of your own special traditions? Just within your family? Whether it be songs or foods or any kind of tradition within your own family?
TSP: We usually have “gio” which is the day when we commemorate someone pass away. My mom she usually host a family gathering and so we usually pray on that day and then we--and then afterward, everyone stay and we have a big feast afterward. So, it’s--I think it’s very traditional of us to do that. During Tet, my mom would make the rice cake. So, she been doing that for a long time. Then she would make--she’s very good at cooking. She make a lot of traditional dishes. We don’t eat a lot American food in our family. I mainly eat out only if I want to eat American food, but most of the time when I come home it’s always Vietnamese food.

JD: Do you consider yourself very traditional in that sense?

TSP: I think I’m traditional for most of the part.

JD: And your group of friends now--do you--are your friends mostly Vietnamese or do you have a variety of friends, diverse group of friends?

TSP: I have a lot of Vietnamese friends. I have Vietnamese friends from the church because I go to Vietnamese mass so I have a lot--most of my high school and college friends they are all Vietnamese, but then now--but now I go to work, right, so I have Indian, I have Caucasian friends at work. So actually, some of my Indian friends I also introduce them to Vietnamese food. They go to Vietnamese restaurants so often that the owner even recognize their face. One guy was saying how now he eat more Vietnamese food than Indian food.

JD: And likewise, do they expose you to their culture or foods?

TSP: Right. Yea, they took me to Indian restaurants once. I enjoy eating Indian curry. It’s--I think it’s a little bit spicy for me, but I usually tend to eat something that’s not too spicy. I’m very adventurous when it comes to food so I experience all kind of food from Indian, Thai to Greek, Lebanese. I have a diverse taste.
JD: And outside of—you’re ambitious about food and you like to introduce your friends to Vietnamese food and you try other cultures’ foods, what about other levels of culture? Like other kinds of traditions. Are you interested in those kinds of things like, for example, if you have an Indian friend, for example, do you like learning about kind of their--certain holidays or certain traditions?

TSP: They do tell me a little about their holidays and traditions. They--they tell me about certain region in India. They would tell me how in India people they don’t eat cow. They--you can see cow walking on the street. And people, they just walking along with humans so. They tell me how life is in India. They will tell me stories about their culture all the time. They will tell me how certain part of India they--they only--they don’t eat meat at all. And then different part they do eat meat. I also know about--they do tell me a lot about their culture as well. In turn, I told them about some of the fun traditions that we have in Vietnamese.

JD: And returning to the Vietnamese traditions, what do you think that--do you think that traditions will change--or added, not changed, but added as generations pass? Do you think that that will happen in the future?

TSP: Right, I think tradition is based on time. So basically as time go by everything will change including tradition. So based on whichever--so I think eventually--right now tradition--our Vietnamese tradition will also have to change to fit with the time that we are living in and the place that we are living in. Not just because some of the old tradition--back in Vietnam right, before--in the old days, marriage is all arranged. We have arranged marriage in Vietnam where--here, you don’t see that here anymore even though I heard there’s still cases in some rural part of Vietnam they still have that. But for the most part all of that is not there anymore. The arranged marriage back in the old days you don’t see that anymore. But then I was talking to some of my
friends--in India, they used to have that in India as well, too. But now it’s more kind of like--it’s being transformed into the internet base where the family will pick someone for--they will--the parents will find the girl for the guy, then they start to talk and then if they okay then they will get to know each other and they can--they will agree if they should marry or not. So I talk to a lot of my Indian friends and they did also have arranged marriage in India so it’s similar, but then now it depend on--they have the right to say yes or no. So it not just the parents.

JD: And about arranged marriage, some families now still, like you said, still do arranged marriages. Why do you think that some families are more, you know, attached to that--to certain parts of traditions such as arranged marriage than other families?

TSP: I think it just--sometimes, that family they--the parents either they live in somewhere far, in some isolated part of Vietnam that sill like from that culture, but like--usually in the city you don’t see that anymore. Only in some isolated region in Vietnam or--even here, I hear--some of my friends--I know people where--I know one friend where his parents hook him up with someone and then the two get to know each other. But that’s not really arranged though.

JD: What other parts of Vietnamese tradition do you think will change, if any, or things added to?

TSP: I think the Vietnamese culture--most likely the wedding tradition. How we have like--wedding, it’s very complicated. You have the tea party before the wedding and then you have people bringing gift over. Sometimes they bring a big roasted pig with the big head sticking out. I think that part might be--I think sometimes--I think that part might be transformed a little bit. I’m sure we still going to have the long dress because that’s our culture and--but then maybe because the Vietnamese tradition, the wedding traditions is kind of like--sometimes it can be
complicated and some people might think it’s very--it consume a lot of time and resources as well, financial resources.

JD: And what are the stages of the wedding? You mentioned the tea party, the bringing of gifts--is that like a engagement party or is that the wedding?

TSP: That’s not an engagement. Usually the family bring over gifts. The groom family bring over gifts like wine or they bring over--what is it--sticky rice. They have the xoi gac, which is sticky rice. They also have wedding rings in there, too.

JD: And that’s before the actual wedding?

TSP: It’s on the day of.

JD: On the day of?

TSP: Right, right.

JD: Okay. And are there any traditions after the wedding ceremony?

TSP: They usually have it at a--I know most of the time people just do it at a Vietnamese restaurant.

JD: The reception?

TSP: Right, the reception. But then--actually the guy, the groom, go to the bride family. They go there and then they have the tea party there. The groom--then the bride family go over to the groom for another tea party.

JD: Before the wedding?

TSP: This the day of the wedding.

JD: But right before the ceremony?

TSP: This is the ceremony. The ceremony is that the groom--the ceremony, usually the groom go to the bride family, they do like--they have--they bow--they bow and pay respect to the ancestors
at the altar. So they bow and they light up the incense and then they pay respect to the ancestors and then they have a small speech. And then introducing the family and then after, you supposed to give tea to the parents. They call the tea ceremony. Then after that, the bride side go to the groom and then they have the same process. You bow to the ancestors and you give the tea to the--(unintelligible) give it to the other family.

JD: That’s a lot of steps.

TSP: Right, it can be very time consuming and it--

JD: Is that--I just wanted to clarify--is that before the wedding ceremony in the church, right?

TSP: Usually that before the--right. Some like--if you Buddhist, then that’s the ceremony right there. You don’t go to the church. But if you a Catholic, then you will have the church ceremony after.

JD: You mentioned paying respects to your ancestors. That kind of reminded me of Buddhist practices and even if your family is Catholic, do they still pay respects to ancestors?

TSP: Right, they still doing that. I don’t think it’s--it’s just tradition. It have nothing to do with religion. We, as a Catholic, we worship only God, but paying respect to the ancestor is just remembering the ancestor. It has nothing to do with religion.

JD: Okay.

TSP: We do have an altar at home. At our family, we have an altar--we have our ancestor pictures on the wall and then my dad would light up the incense maybe on their memorial day when they pass away. My dad usually light up the incense just to commemorate that day.

JD: I want to go back a little bit because we didn’t get a chance to talk about--we’ve been talking about culture a lot--Vietnamese culture, American culture--and we didn’t get a chance to talk about the Vietnam War. And I wanted to ask you how the war--I know you were born in 1982--
TSP: That was after the war ended.

JD: Right. That was after the war ended. But can you tell me about, if any--I’m sure there have been effects on your family, but how about on yourself? Could you feel any effects from war?

TSP: Even though I was born after the war, but then my dad he was in the war. He’s an officer in the war back then. He told me stories and once in a while my dad have a gathering of all these people who former officers. They have a gathering at some restaurant. So my dad would bring my entire family and then I went there and I get to listen to their stories. They usually tell stories about how--about the war so--I do have a little understanding, knowledge of the war. They--I was talking to my dad the other day and he was telling me how he survived in the--in prison or in the--they call it reeducation camp, but then--they put you in this isolated place out in the middle of nowhere and then you have to survive. You have to plant your own vegetable and then he was telling me he have to cut, chop down woods. Basically they take them to this jungle and they have to cut down all this wood and make their own houses. And make the houses for the communist soldiers so that they can sleep there. He was telling me how in the morning he have to eat this one porridge, the chao --a small bowl of porridge in the morning and then he said that later on in the day people have a bowl of rice. The rice from this old--the grain it’s like really old from some really long time ago. It’s all rotted and when they open up the bag they can see all these insects crawling out. Some people they got sick from eating that rice.

JD: And he was there for how long?

TSP: He was there for a little bit over four years. And then--he told me stories some people they couldn’t survive that kind of living so they would try to escape. But then the thing that place is right next to the Cambodian border and the way there is that--when you escape and go through that border there’s a lot of land mines. He didn’t--back in the war, usually you step on it and it
might explode and you not going to survive. And even if you escape that and you might get captured by the Cambodian army and then they will ship you back to Vietnam. My dad would tell me some people they--a safer route would be--my dad would tell me how they go back to Saigon and then they have to use a different name and try to--somehow escape from Vietnam on a boat.

JD: Do you still have family in Vietnam right now?

TSP: Yes, I still have--most of my mom’s relatives and my dad’s relatives are still back there.

JD: Did they choose to stay or were they just unable to--

TSP: No, they cannot come here. My--most of my mom’s relatives they are still back there. They call us all the time. My parents talk to them all the time so I know how life is like in Vietnam.

JD: You said that they couldn’t come.

TSP: No.

JD: What are the reasons?

TSP: Because they didn’t fight in the war and my--actually my mom sponsoring some of them to come over, but that will be several years away.

JD: So they didn’t fight in the war--

TSP: They can only come here if they fight in the war and they went into prison for at least three years or if they have family here and sponsoring them over.

JD: Right. And those regulations are under--

TSP: The U.S.

JD: The U.S. regulations?

TSP: Right.

JD: The HO Program?
TSP: No, no. This is like--right now I don’t think the HO Program is--probably almost over because it’s been around for a long time so most of the people who qualify already left. So now it’s just mainly the family sponsorship program.

JD: Right, it’s been a long time.

TSP: So the thing--life in Vietnam is very--it’s very hectic. And usually--my brother he went back last year and he didn’t like it. It’s really hot and humid over there and it’s dirty, too. So the thing that you go back there everything cheap so a lot of people here like to go back because they can…there’s a lot of tropical fruits over there and then the living is cheaper. They can enjoy more on the American currency. They can afford to--everything is all cheap over there compared to how much you pay here. My brother he didn’t like it because just--also because all this corruption going on in the government. You want to get anything done, you have to pay, you have to bribe all these officer and then--when my brother went back he got stopped by this traffic controller and then the guy actually like make him pay. He have to bribe the guy to avoid getting a ticket.

JD: Would you ever want to go back to Vietnam?

TSP: Right now--maybe once it’s--once it’s better. Right now I don’t think with all this corruption and--I have no plan right now to go back. Maybe once the government go through major changes, I may go back.

JD: Are there any other things that you would want to share with me? Any memories or stories that you didn’t get a chance to share yet?

TSP: Let’s see--no, I think that’s about it.

JD: Okay, thank you very much for allowing me to interview you.

TSP: I hope you get a lot out of my interview--all the stories that--
JD: I’m sure I will.

TSP: If you need any more then you can just ask me.

JD: Okay, thank you very much.

TSP: Okay, you’re welcome.