TVD: This is Thuy Vo Dang with the Vietnamese American History Oral Project at UC Irvine.

Today is March 14, 2013. I will be interviewing Mr. David Tran in Irwindale, California.

TVD: So first, can you please state your full name and your date of birth for the record?

DT: My name is David Tran. My birthday is November 19, 1945.

TVD: And where were you born?

DT: I was born in Southwest Vietnam, in the city of Soc Trang.

TVD: Do you have any memories of Soc Trang?

DT: I was born in Soc Trang and grew up there for 16 years.
Then I moved from Soc Trang to Saigon.

TVD: So you spent most of your childhood in Soc Trang, such as going to school?

Can you tell me a little bit about your parents? What did they do for a living?

DT: My father is a merchant. He handled many different businesses, one after the other. I know that.

TVD: What about your mom?

DT: She was a housewife.

TVD: So I know that your background is Chinese.

Was your father the generation that migrated to Vietnam or was it before that?

DT: Even my grandfather was born in Vietnam.
TVD: So it was many generations?
DT: Yes, it was a long time ago.

I have no idea nor pictures because they were burnt in 1945 after World War II ended.
So I don't have anything. There's nothing left to remember.

TVD: What happened in 1945, the year of your birth?
DT: That was the year when World War II ended.

TVD: Did World War II have any effect on your immediate family?
DT: I have no idea. Everything before World War II was burnt.

TVD: So your family burnt all of their photographs and records?
DT: No. Everything before the war was burnt so there is nothing left to remember.

TVD: So how many people are in your family, besides you and your parents?
DT: I have an older brother, an older sister, and six younger brothers and sisters.

TVD: So there's nine of you altogether, nine kids and your parents.
Can you tell me a little bit about what going to school was like?
Did you go to school in Soc Trang?
DT: Yes.

TVD: Do you have any memories?
DT: I went to a school in Bai Xau, which is five kilometers from Soc Trang.

TVD: Is that a village or a town?
DT: Yes, it is a village. It is in the Ba Xuyen Province.

TVD: What were the people like in your community? What were your neighbors like?
Were they close? Were most of them merchants also or were they farmers?
DT: I’m Cantonese. The Chinese in Vietnam mostly *buôn bán* [commerce] are mostly merchants.
TVD: So Trieu Chau is your cultural background?

DT: Almost everyone has their own business. Their parents had businesses.

TVD: Was your village mostly people with Trieu Chau as their background or was it mixed?

DT: There were a lot of Chinese, but mostly Trieu Chau in South Vietnam.

TVD: So when you attended school, did you learn Chinese or Vietnamese?

DT: Chinese.

TVD: Just Chinese?

DT: Yes.

TVD: So it was a school mostly for Chinese kids?

DT: Right.

TVD: Did you have any favorite subjects that you learned in school, such as math, literature, or history?

DT: Math. It's easy to learn, not easy to forget. Math is my favorite.

TVD: Did you do well in math?

DT: Yes.

TVD: Did all of your brothers and sisters also have the chance to go to school?

DT: Seems like it.

TVD: Would you describe your family as working class, middle class, or upper class?

Did they do well? I know your father was a businessman. Did you make a good living?

Because that was a big family. My understanding is that the Soc Trang area is not the wealthiest area, right?

DT: My father takes care of the children. We are not rich men, but not so poor that we don't have food. So I don't have any idea about that.
TVD: So you were comfortable?

DT: Everyone seemed OK.

TVD: In your experience growing up, before you were 16, what was life like? Because that was a time when there were a lot of changes in Vietnam with the wars and you were just coming of age. As a young man, did you know what the country was going through?

DT: No. You hated the government, because we thought that the war must be stopped and we waited for it to stop, but it was never stopped. Some of the friends and neighbors' children became soldiers and they passed away and died.

TVD: Did you have any friends who died during the war?

DT: They were not really friends. It was the neighbors. You must be 20 or 20-something years of age for the army, as for those with the same age as me, then no.

TVD: So it was mostly older kids who went?

DT: Yeah.

TVD: So in your family did anyone join the military?

DT: Only me.

TVD: Only you? And why did you join the military?

DT: I had no choice. You hated it, always hated it. You can do everything until 20 years old. I always hid at home and like that.

TVD: I know that a lot of the young men, at the time, were hiding to avoid the draft. Was school an option? Some people told me that, you know, if they tested tú tài [high school graduate degree] and went to school, they could avoid getting drafted.
DT: Delays. It tends to only delay, but you need to pay money. So later on we had no choice. I paid money and we stayed home and we cannot do anything. We have the permit to go forth and back. But every week, we would need to go to the tent to get the meat and pay them money.

TVD: Wow. So you said your family moved to Saigon?

DT: No, only me.

TVD: Oh, only you?

DT: My older brother lived in Saigon so I followed him and lived in the village. I found a job and started working.

TVD: When you were 16?

DT: Yeah. I graduated elementary school for 6 years and then I went to work.

TVD: Doing what kind of work?

DT: The first job was at a store selling chemicals. It was for three or four years. Then I came back to school to study high school.

TVD: In Saigon?

DT: No, in Soc Trang. I came back to Soc Trang to study in high school up to three years.

TVD: Was it public school or private school?

DT: It was a public school but it was taught by Chinese not by Vietnamese government.

TVD: Did you have to pay to go to school?

DT: Yeah.

TVD: So in high school, what did you study? Did you go into any specific area?

I heard that some people, you know, would focus on literature or history because they were tested into it.

DT: High school is only three years. So it was the standard high school.
TVD: So what did you do after high school?

DT: The army.

TVD: That’s when you got drafted, when you were about 20 or so?

DT: Yeah.

TVD: How did...do you remember how that happened? How did they draft you?

Did they send you a notice or did they go to your house and knock on the door and taking you a way?

DT: No. At nighttime, the policeman came and knocked on your door. They know that your house had somebody there - a young man - and at night time you stayed home and they search it. So we have a special hiding area. Finally my brother, my older brother, found the connection with the army.

TVD: So you were actually a career soldier? You were rented to the army and you had a salary for your service in the army?

DT: No

TVD: So when you were sent to the army, did they pay you a monthly salary to live on or to send back to your family?

DT: Yeah. They pay you money because they were supported by the USA and you have been approved. I was under a general and was in his group. We need to sign but we don’t get the money. The money goes to them.

TVD: Hmm, so there was some corruption.

DT: Yeah, because they have the soldier to protect Him or to be a driver or to be in a household or a gardener. So they can have a hundred soldier that don’t need to fight. And you just signed your name that you belonged to them.
TVD: So you were part of a general’s unit and would be protected so that way you wouldn’t be deployed?

DT: But if you want to in that group, you need to pay a lot of money first, like on the New Year’s.

TVD: So it’s like paying for protection?

DT: Yeah. Always pay.

TVD: So what was your rank in the army? It was an army, right?

DT: Yeah.

TVD: Did you ever go to battles?

DT: No.

TVD: Did you stay in the region or did you travel all over?

DT: No, I stayed in the region.

TVD: Were you able to see your family during that time?

DT: Yeah. I stayed at home. They gave you the permit. So if they need to buy something, they send you. I wore the soldier’s uniform so the policemen won’t take me, but the army policemen will take you.

TVD: How many years did you serve?

DT: For five years, until 1975. On the last day, I was sent back to the tent.

TVD: During that time, when you were in the army and also still living in Soc Trang...right?

DT: In Saigon.

TVD: Oh, in Saigon. You were restationed to Saigon?

DT: Yeah.

TVD: What was it like in Saigon at the time?
DT: There were a lot of business and it was very busy. At nighttime you can hear the bombs, the fighting [imitates bomb noises]. But you felt nothing. Every day is the same and it’s always busy.

TVD: Yeah, I’ve heard that Saigon was very protected from any of the war, any of the fighting. That was, I guess, in the early 70’s right? Did you encounter Americans at the time? Were there Americans that you communicated with or met?

DT: No.

TVD: Do you remember seeing Americans around?

DT: Yeah. You see them a lot as a merchant.

TVD: What was your impression of them? What did you think of them?

DT: We don’t like the war. We hoped that it would stop. The newspaper and the radio would be covering a meeting in Paris to try to settle and settle and settle. We hoped that it would be settled and peaceful when the president changed to Nixon. We hoped that the war would stop and it never stopped.

TVD: What happened in 1975? Where were you and what were you doing?

DT: It was just a normal day. The army fought to get the town. The President, Nguyen Van Thieu, robbed the money. It seemed like they don’t like Vietnam. They don’t think about the Vietnamese. They think about themselves. They take as much as they can.

TVD: So where were you in April when Saigon felled?

DT: April 1975, I was in Saigon.

TVD: Do you remember any of the…?

DT: Yeah, I felt happy. We felt happy but we don’t welcome the communist government because we don’t know. But no more war! Everyone was happy.

TVD: At that time you were in your 20s?
DT: Almost 30.

TVD: Did you already marry?

DT: Yeah I married four to five months before.

TVD: Oh, before 1975? How did you meet your wife?

DT: We knew each other. The circle was small and we knew each other.

TVD: Did your families know each other and introduced you?

DT: No.

TVD: Did you meet in Soc Trang or Saigon?

DT: We know each other for three or four years before we married.

TVD: Is your wife also Chinese?

DT: Yes.

TVD: How did you actually met? What was the custom for dating or socializing? Did you take her to the movies or did you have to visit her house?

DT: I think for the entertainment, we went to the movies, because you cannot travel or go far away since the police always stop you and check you. It was unsafe. So we don’t travel to the other cities. Just around the city and Cholon.

TVD: Oh and Cholon? Is that where you live specifically? In Cholon?

DT: Yeah.

TVD: Is that where you lived specifically? In Cho Lon? For young people at the time, when they meet someone that they want to know better, like dating...So let’s think of later on when people don’t know what it was like in Saigon and what the social life was like. How did you go about having a courtship or building a relationship? Did you have to ask permission first? Did you have to go to her house first and meet her parents?
DT: No.

TVD: So you could kind of meet and socialize on your own without chaperones?

DT: Yeah. She’s 24 or 25 years old. She has the freedom to go anywhere and have friends. The parents don’t stop you. Everyone is busy. When you grow up, you needed to marry. You have to find a husband or find a wife. So it was normal.

TVD: So she was 24 already. Was she working?

DT: Yes, she was a nurse.

TVD: Oh she was a nurse? So when you finally got to the point when you got married, what was the ceremony like? Did you do it at home or at a church or a temple?

DT: It was very bad luck for me. Our marriage party had nothing.

TVD: Oh, why?

DT: No money.

TVD: Oh. So you didn’t have an actual wedding?

DT: Yeah, we had the xe hoa [carriage] and ruốc dâu [bridal procession] but we didn’t have the dinner party.

TVD: Oh. So you did the tea ceremony?

DT: Yeah.

TVD: Did you and your wife’s family practice the ancestor worshipping and pay your respect at the family altar?

DT: Yeah.

TVD: So what did she wear? Did she wear a white dress?

DT: Yeah. It was a white dress.

TVD: Did she wear a white dress or áo dài or áo suôn xám?
DT: She wore the wedding dress, not áo dài.

TVD: What did you wear?

DT: The suit.

TVD: You wore a suit? You said that you were poor at the time so you didn't have a party. Did you rent the suit or did you own the suit?

DT: I was 30 years old that year. It was my first time wearing a suit. I didn't know how to wear it. Even the tie, I didn't know how to tie it.

TVD: Did your family come up from Soc Trang to attend?

DT: No.

TVD: So it was just you and her side of the family?

DT: Right.

TVD: How did you feel at the time when you were getting married?

Everyone said that's happiest day of your life, but it sounds like it was kind of hard.

DT: To this day, I still ask my wife: “I’m a poor guy. Why did you marry me?” “I don’t know!”

TVD: So you were a soldier and you didn’t have any money, but she married you.

DT: Yeah.

TVD: Did you have to ask her parents for permission to get married? Was there a đâm hỏi [engagement ceremony] or nói [tell] first?

DT: Yeah. We did what we needed to do, but because she has her job. She didn’t take money from her parents. So her parents didn’t say anything. “I don’t have money for you. I cannot help you but I cannot stop you. You can do what you want.”

TVD: So you were both very independent.

DT: Yes.
TVD: So you got married in 1975. And then the war ended. What happened after? Where did you live because you were no longer in the army?

DT: During the your time in the army, there’s nothing to do. You cannot do anything. You cannot open a business and even marriage. How can you take care of your family or your children? But at almost at the end of the way, I was 30 years old and my wife was 27 years old and it was time to marry. During the army, my older brother owned some piece of land in Long Binh, Biên Hòa. He had a piece of land and we grew "tea".

TVD: You grew tea?

DT: Chili.

TVD: Oh chili.

DT: Yeah, everyday we do nothing but take care of the chili and bring it to the market. You sell it. Then after the war, we used the chili to make hot sauce.

TVD: How did you come up with the idea?

DT: During harvest season, there's a lot of chili and the pricing was low and nobody wanted to buy. My first job was in a chemical retail so I know how to preserve and how to do it.

TVD: At the time, was there any other chili sauce out in the market?

DT: Yeah. In Vietnam, fresh chili are red-colored not green-colored. And they are sold daily in the vegetable market. When you buy vegetable, they give you. But everyday it's different. The chili that was from 10 days ago will be different. The price is different everyday. At that time, we had chili sauce from fresh chili. But we don't have any chili manufacturing or big production. Điểm tương-they make the soy sauce, the chili sauce, lemons, something like that.
It was small but not popular. No one bought the commercial product. They made it themselves. Even if you opened a restaurant, you made your own. Like in Mexico, the restaurant made their own salsa. Hot sauce was the same way. Mostly they use it in phở. They have it but it was not spicy. I think they bought it somewhere else, but it was not spicy and it didn't have a good flavor. I thought of making it because the pricing of the fresh chili is quite different; it jumps up and down a lot. If I can make it and keep it fresh and keep the pricing low...When the pricing goes up, we still keep the same, so we would have market.

TVD: What year did you start doing that?

DT: After the war in '75.

TVD: Oh ok, so you started right away.

DT: Yeah.

DT: Did your brother also help you?

DT: No. We made it at home. It was homemade. There was no manufacturing, just homemade.

TVD: So you started making it at home and how did you bottle it? Into a jar?

DT: Into a jar.

TVD: Ok, so was it like a glass jar?

DT: A glass jar.

DT: So did you sell it at a storefront?

DT: No, at the time the communist came and they closed almost every business because it belonged to the government. Some people had nothing to do
and they came to buy from me and bring to the houses, each houses along street to sell them.

It wasn't very big but it was OK. I kept making it until 1978.

TVD: Did you have any children at that time?

DT: Yeah, one. William, my son.

TVD: What year was William born?

DT: November.

TVD: November in 1975?

DT: Right.

TVD: Oh OK. So you had a small child and a small business and you lived for a couple of years in Vietnam after everything changed back to one unified country. Were there any changes in your family? Like your parents and brothers and sisters.

DT: They lived in the village so they had a small business. I don’t take care of them and they don’t take care of me. So we don’t what they did. Everyone seemed OK. We’re not asking for a lot of money or anything like that. It seems very easy to live.

TVD: And I know during that time, a lot of people were trying to leave the country. Was that something that you had in mind wanting to do?

DT: From beginning...during the war, we cannot do anything. At the end of the war, we felt happy. The big businesses closed but small businesses were still busy. Only the wisest followed the other one to leave Vietnam because the one I knew were classmates or family or the neighbors. Everyone left. I was the only who stayed there. There’s no more friends. So we left.

TVD: I heard that the government had a program especially for Chinese to leave the country. Did you to one of those programs?

DT: Yes, we did.
TVD: Do you remembered what it was called?
DT: Ten ounces of gold. My gold.
TVD: So you had to pay?
DT: Pay each one. And for the fee, the other two ounces.
TVD: So that was for each person?
DT: Each person. Children under 18, then we just give the fee.
TVD: The cost was two ounces?
DT: Two ounces.

TVD: At that time, I know the program was targeting specifically Chinese in order to encourage Chinese to leave the country. How did you feel about that?
DT: Between country and country, I know that China helped Vietnam to begin with the USA. In the meantime, the Soviet, Russia, helped them too. But Vietnam was closer to Russia. So they try together but they are not the same thing, because they want to take all the business, all the value from the Chinese, because Chinese own the businesses, from the bank to the transportations. Everything. They controlled. The economy was controlled by the Chinese hands so they are pushing them out to take it.

TVD: And for you, your family has lived in Vietnam for many generations. Your dad, your grandfather, who was buried in Vietnam. When you heard that there’s this program to, basically, force Chinese to leave the country, how did that...I mean, what were you feeling?
DT: You know, we’re not the target for them. We’re not the rich men. So they’re not against us.
TVD: So it was more of an opportunity for you to go.
DT: Yeah. You know what? The Chinese left because they didn’t import. The Chinese have connections with foreign countries so they can set up the boats that let them go.
TVD: So your boat - that you mention earlier before we started the tape - your boat, you said, was large.

DT: Yes, the largest one that carried more than 3000 refugees.

TVD: Wow! Where did it carry you from? Where was the port in Vietnam when you went on the boat?

DT: We can’t say really. We don’t travel a lot and we don’t know around the sea gulf like which one or where we’re going. We don’t know because you pay the group. And about 4 or 5 o’clock, you go somewhere and wait there and they take your baggage. They don’t let you bring it, like the gold. Even the Vietnamese money, you must leave it there. And they take the bus and bring you somewhere in the almost evening or night and go to a small boat and sail you to a big boat outside. So we don’t know where it is. Yeah, we really don’t know.

TVD: So when you left, it was you, your wife, and your son. The three of you?

DT: Different groups. My family had four groups. My wife was first and my father-in-law, my mother-in-law, and finally me.

TVD: Oh, so you didn’t travel with your wife.

DT: No, we do not trust the government. Maybe they’re asking you to pay and take you to a different location.

TVD: Were you able to prepare anything? What did you pack? What did you take with you?

DT: The housing and anything inside, you must sign and give to them, the government. You cannot take it. You cannot sell it. And then they let you go. So if you have jewelry and gold dollars, you try to hide it and to bring it with you.

TVD: Were you able to bring anything with you?

DT: A locket.
TVD: How did you do that? Did you sew it into your clothes? Because they search your baggage right?

DT: They searched it. When you carry it and you put it there. They said, “Ok, finally, you can go. But if I check it and you have it, you cannot go.” And most people worry so those who hid it, put it back and take it back out. And they checked it but not with detail. I can go. I can leave it. Yeah, they still collect it. But I carried it.

TVD: And you were traveling alone, by yourself?

DT: No.

TVD: I meant without your family.

DT: At that time that they told you to go, they make a tour. The top honor by gold. They made it dirty. They want for the group. They have this small ship, a small boat. They can use the tool for the merchant. For me, you cannot carry money, but you can carry food. So I brought condensed milk, sữa đặc. And I sew it. I carried it. They checked it. It was milk so they let me go.

TVD: Wow! So you hid your gold in cans of condensed milk. How much were you able to bring?

DT: A total of 100 ounces.

TVD: Wow, hundred ounces of gold. What was the value at the time?

DT: At that time, it was 200 something per ounce. Yeah, about 20,000.

TVD: Wow, that’s pretty amazing. So on that trip, when you left on this small boat to the larger boat, when did you reunite with your family?

DT: When we leave, it was just one month one after the other for the four groups. The same year 1978. She came first. She went to the Indonesian camp and she came to the United States from June 1st, 1979. She came to the United States and two months later, I followed her.
TVD: Were you able to stay connected with letters or news from each other?

DT: Yeah. Before we left, we have a connection. We have someone in Hong Kong. And we know where they are.

TVD: So for you when you left in ’78, how long was the boat ride before you got to Hong Kong?

DT: Only a couple of days. We arrived at Hong Kong on Christmas Eve.

TVD: Were there a lot of refugees there already in the camp?

DT: At the camp, no. They don’t have a camp. They camped in an airport, the old airport. They used it to camp. We went to the old airport. What did they name it…? It has been too long, thirty-something years. I don’t remember it. Then they opened a new camp to be camped so they can settle us.

TVD: So you first arrived in an airport that was turned into a temporary shelter and then transported to Jubilee. How long did you stay?

DT: We stayed eight months. In Hong Kong for eight months.

TVD: Was it a closed camp or…?

DT: Open. Open camp.

TVD: So what did you during the time that you spent in the camp?

DT: Because I carried money, I didn’t need to walk.

TVD: So you got along OK?

DT: Yeah.

TVD: What was your daily life like in camp? What did you do everyday?

DT: They give you food. They give you that everyday….No, at that time, they don’t give us. But the bus came to pick you up. They fetch more and they need more people. But me, with only one friend, had nothing to do. I took the class of cooking.
TVD: Oh, you took a cooking class?

DT: We went cooking in the morning. We paid the class fee and we have free lunch. After we cook, then we eat it. And then sightseeing in Hong Kong. On the bus, we could go anywhere.

TVD: Where was the cooking class? Was it in the camp?

DT: No. Outside.

TVD: Oh OK. So you took the cooking class and you spent your day sightseeing. Did you know where you were going?

DT: Yeah, we applied to the United States. And we wait for the documents and for them to let you know when. We know they would take us because I was a soldier. So they take us.

TVD: So why the United States? Why not another, Canada or Australia?

DT: When we left - my wife left first - we said we choose Australia. We don’t know how much. Australia may be better, but they did not accept us.

TVD: So then the United States was your second choice?

DT: Yeah.

TVD: Did you spend anytime preparing for life in America? You know, like learning English or…?

DT: No. I have learned English in Vietnam for a short time. I didn’t really go to school. I can read it, but I cannot speak it because you have no opportunity to talk.

TVD: So you didn’t spend anytime learning English?

DT: No

TVD: In the camp, did they have any classes or programs or even social workers who came in and helped you?
DT: If you need help, maybe you would get it, but I was different. I wanted to sit in Hong Kong, so when it’s nighttime we came back to the camp; in the daytime, we go out.

TVD: What was Hong Kong like?

DT: From Vietnam and you go to Hong Kong, it’s different.

TVD: Some people have told me when they came to Hong Kong...I interviewed another person who left about the same time you did and she said that she wanted to stay in Hong Kong and work there.

DT: It is good enough. Anything better than Vietnam, we said ok. We don't know when and where. We were scared to leave camp. We don’t have Chinese food. Even the bowls and chopsticks, they said, “You need to prepare.” My wife, in the Indonesian camp, bought a rice cooker. She said that Americans don’t have it.

TVD: Oh. So why couldn’t you stay in Hong Kong?

DT: No. Hong Kong island. They don’t allow you. We sit in a boat and came to Hong Kong and parked outside, waiting for the group of UN.

TVD: The UNHCR? Was it?

DT: Yeah. They promised to accept us. The Hong Kong government let us go. But the other fees, the Hong Kong government paid.

TVD: Did they ever you an ID card when you were in the camp? The ICM ID card with the picture?

DT: They didn’t take any picture. I don’t remember.

TVD: I’m guessing you didn’t keep it then?

DT: No.

TVD: They usually have a card with a thumbprint.
DT: You go camp like this. If you do not return with 10 people, you cannot go in. Yeah, we had an ID card.

TVD: Oh OK. So there was a checkpoint in and out of the camp?
DT: Yeah.

TVD: When you found out that you were accepted to America and that you would be going, how did you...did you prepare? How did you plan for it?
DT: Ok, my wife came here first. The other thing, I know that Americans accepted us...We didn’t prepare or buy a lot of things. No.

TVD: Your wife was with her family, right? And your son.
DT: Yeah.

TVD: And they got here first? So were you interviewed? Do you remember being interviewed by immigrant officials?
DT: Yes.

TVD: Was there also a health screening? Like a medical exam?
DT: Yeah, we had it.

TVD: Were you cleared?
DT: Yeah.

TVD: When you arrived here, what kind of clothes were you wearing? Did you get to go out to shop in Hong Kong? Usually what I have seen are that people are issued with jackets when they first get to the US when they step off the plane. But recently I heard another story from someone who told me he was in Indonesia and he went out and he bought Levi jeans and Seiko watch.
DT: Ok, he’s lucky he had money. Mostly those in camp, in the refugee in Thailand or Indonesia, they don’t have money. So only a few people have other royalties from outside to transmit the
money over. Then they can buy it. So what they wear when they left Vietnam was different. For us, no. In Hong Kong, we had new shoes. I didn’t bring anything from Vietnam to the United States. So nothing for souvenirs.

TVD: No family photos?
DT: No.

TVD: So when you got to the U.S., what month was it?
DT: August.

TVD: In August? It was the summer? And where did you arrive? Which city?
DT: Boston.

TVD: Boston. Who was there to pick you up?
DT: My wife was already there and my wife came with my sister-in-law. And at that time she [sister-in-law] had a boyfriend to take care and pick me up.

TVD: So you arrived at, I guess, Boston Logan International Airport?
DT: Right.

TVD: Where did you go to live from there?
DT: We rented a house. Yeah, we rented a home over there. They rent already and we live there.

TVD: You lived with your sister-in-law, too?
DT: No, my wife.

TVD: Just your wife?

TVD: When you arrive, did you have a plan on how to rebuild your life?
DT: Yeah. I learned in the cooking class. I was planning to open a restaurant. I bought a used car in Boston.
TVD: What kind of car?
DT: A Nova.
TVD: A Nova?
DT: Yeah.
TVD: A Nova. What brand is that? What make?
DT: Chevrolet.
TVD: Chevrolet. A Chevrolet Nova?
DT: At that time, I know that it was popular for the policeman.
TVD: Do you remember how much it costed?
DT: It was 10 ounces of gold. About 2000-something.
TVD: That was a lot of money at the time.
DT: Yeah, 2000-something.
TVD: Did you know how to drive?
TVD: When you got here, you had to take...you know, you had to apply for your driver’s license.
DT: For the writing, I had the old army driver license. So we just changed it. We didn’t have any real tests.
TVD: Did you have to take that driver writing test in English?
DT: Seems like it was English, not Chinese.
TVD: Then you passed? How many time did you have to take it?
DT: No.
TVD: Just one time? Wow. So you got the driver license. You got the car. And then did you open your restaurant?
DT: No. At the time, it was cold. It was winter. That year, it didn’t snow. I didn’t feel comfortable with that city. It was small and I have a brother-in-law. He came first, one or two months earlier than me but after my wife. He lives in Los Angeles. So I contacted with him. Because when I make the hot sauce, he helped me in Vietnam. So I asked him “What is good in Los Angeles? Did you see the red chili?” He said “Yeah, sometimes.” So yeah.

TVD: Did you visit first or did you just…?

DT: No. We waited until after the New Year’s. On the 3rd or the 4th of January, my wife, my children, and I flew to Los Angeles.

TVD: So you didn’t make it through the first winter in Boston.

DT: Yeah. We waited to see the snow, but there was no snow that year.

TVD: So in Boston, at that time, were there other Asians that you saw?

DT: Yeah. There was a lot of Vietnamese.

TVD: Was there a Chinatown?

DT: Yeah. There was a small Chinatown.

TVD: So you didn’t find chili over there to make your hot sauce?

DT: No.

TVD: In 1980, you came to Los Angeles?

DT: Yes.

TVD: Which city in Los Angeles?

DT: Lincoln Heights in Los Angeles.

TVD: Oh. Lincoln Heights? How did you…what was the plan from there? How did you start?

DT: We rented a house and I lived with my brother-in-law, my wife, my children. My brother-in-law rented a house in Lincoln Heights. Then I started to prepare to build a business. Then I
registered with the lawyer, the office to register for the company. And I remembered, February 5th. We started working right away. February.

TVD: Wow you came in January and in February you started a business!

DT: Yeah. We registered using the house address. They were looking at the building, because in the United States, you couldn’t make it at home. So we rented a Zone 1. That is the manufacturing building in Losping close to Chinatown.

TVD: And where did you get chilies from?

DT: We went to the supermarket to find it. We tried to buy from the supermarket. Sometimes they have it. Sometimes they don’t. I am so lucky. I remember we found the central market, where they produce the tập trung that they sold produce in the same market.

TVD: Oh wholesale?

DT: Yeah, wholesale. From Mexico, there was chili. We asked the markets if they had chili. They said that “No, some day they have it. Some day they don’t.” But they have a small volume. And the guy told me to go to the central market. Then I went there to find it. At the time, only green chili was there. When there’s too many, the chili goes to the H. And they have half red, half green...and they turn orange, or turn red. Mostly they throw it away. They have no market. It was very cheap for a sample. 50 cents per pound. Then they sell it to me 20 cents, that’s 30 cents. They don’t have any day that I can’t get as much as they have because we make by mixing the small ones. So today I buy 500 pounds and tomorrow the same chili that they had today, they lower the price. And then it finally goes to 10 cents and you take it. They keep it.

TVD: When you registered your business, you had to come up with a name for your company right?
DT: Yeah. Remember my boat carried me was named *Huy Fong*. So I used *Huy Fong*. And in 1945, the year of my birth, was the year of the rooster, so I used the rooster.

TVD: Did you come up with the logo design and all of that?

DT: Yeah, I had the idea for the logo. I found one architect in Knot Springs. But now they moved so I cannot find them. They drew for me.

TVD: In starting the business, did you have any or face any challenges? Like at the time, in the early 80s, did you need to take out loans? Did you have to work with banks?

DT: One more time, I want to say my reason for what I said. When I left Vietnam, I brought 100 pounds of gold. In Boston, 1979, I sold it. 10 ounce. About 297 or so per ounce. When I started the business in 1980, the gold went up to 830 dollars per ounce.

TVD: Oh wow!

DT: And I sold at one time. The manufacturing was small, about 2,500 square feet. I remodeled and I sell. When I need money, I sell and sell, so I would have enough for 50,000 dollars.

TVD: Wow, that was a small fortune at the time.

DT: Yeah, and then we started the business. I don’t know how big the business was. I wasn’t thinking of selling it mainstream to the Americans. I was going to sell it to Chinese or Vietnamese.

TVD: On the Asian market?

DT: The Asian market. And I can get chili and I can make and all are gone because we sold it. But we were always waiting for the chili. I don’t know if tomorrow if I get it or not. Every morning, about 4 o’clock, I went to the central market to find the chili, to get it. And then go back and wash it, ground it, and pack it.

TVD: So you were doing all of that?
DT: Yeah. So my wife helped me. My father-in-law. My brother-in-law. We have a minivan to go to the supermarket to sell.

TVD: When did you start expanding?

DT: I still remember the first month. We finished everything and got the permit from the Health Department before June. Then we started. The first 2 months, we got about 2,300 that month.

TVD: 2,300 bottles?

DT: Dollars.

TVD: Oh dollars.

DT: Yeah. And the business, if I can get chili, I package it and I sell it. So it’s always not enough.

TVD: How much was one bottle when you first started selling?

DT: The price compared with today is still more than today. The bottle was two dollars. For a new one, it takes 24 dollars. And now it is only 20 dollars for 32 years.

TVD: Wow.

DT: Only 20 because you make 500 pounds a day, your cost and rent cost more. But if you to 5000 pounds a day, then you saved the operating expenses. So the reason why we’re not advertising, never advertising…. We saved all the money because we just try to get the chili, make it, package it, and sell it. If we advertise it, we have no product.

TVD: So all of the recent promotional things that have come out of Sriracha.

DT: Not from ours.

TVD: Yeah. I noticed that there’s a video that went viral on YouTube. There’s a glazed potato chips that just came out. When they do that, they have to contract with you, right? When they use your sauce, do they need to get your permission or anything?

DT: No, they don’t ask.
TVD: Oh I forgot to ask. You actually mentioned the name of the company, where it came from, but the actual sauce “Sriracha.” Where does that name come from?


TVD: Ớt tương?


Everyone know how to make it. You know, nước mắm [fish sauce] with chili and garlic and a lot of water and sugar, right? So you named it. We make it easy.

Our hot sauce is not the straight dipping sauce. The dipping sauce is nước mắm but you need to use chili and garlic. So we have the ingredient.

You buy one bottle and you can make your sauce. You can make your dipping sauce. And you can cook it using chili. Not like the dipping sauce. So I make chili garlic.

Then someone, for a special reason because they're đạo Phật [Buddhist], don't like garlic.

So I make the chili without garlic. So everyone will use the Vietnamese sauce with the chili garlic. And I said why don't we make fish and hot sauce? At that time, in Indonesia, they have the chili paste. They named it ”Sambal Oelek.” So I used some Sambal Oelek.

And the smooth one, we used in phở in Vietnam.

So popular in the United States and Thailand is the hot sauce so I named it like that.

But that formula to do it and even the chili is different.

I don't take one bottle to copy exactly what's inside. No, just using the name to sell it as the Asian hot sauce.

TVD: So are you the one who came up with the recipe? For all the ingredients in every sauce?

DT: Yes.
TVD: And is this something you’re passing down in your family alone or is this...? I don’t really have a business background so I don’t know how that works in terms of trademarking and all of that. Did you have to apply for a patent or a trademark?

DT: No.

TVD: Or is this just a recipe that you have in your company?

DT: Yeah. We just made it until the business went big. Then we thought of making a trademark. Otherwise, somebody trademark and say that it’s their trademark so we cannot use it. So we trademark, not patent. Patent means they cannot make the same product. The trademark is the logo, my description, the bottle, the street address. That’s what we need.

TVD: So when did you go big like you said? What year was it?

DT: From the beginning until now, almost everyday, every month, every year, it goes up. Even now. So it’s not like it suddenly jumps up.

TVD: So it’s been a steady growth. When did you hiring employees that were not family members?

DT: Two or three years after that. 1994. Only two or three years using the family. Then we hired two Mexican guys and added more and more.

TVD: And originally, you said your company was located in another place before you moved here?

DT: We started from 1980 at Knot Spring, Chinatown. The north of the Broadway.

TVD: Knot Spring?

DT: Knot Spring. And on the same street, the location is there. And 1987, we moved to Rosemead with a 240,000 square feet building. At that time, it was 78,000. Then 1996, we bought the building next to us. That’s where they builded Hula-hoops.
TVD: Oh, the Hula-hoop.

DT: The founder, that’s where they made it.

TVD: Oh, so you bought their building?

DT: Yeah, they made Hula-hoops. 170,000 square feet. And we evolved to 240,000 square feet. We said it was too big for us. We’ll never use it. But who knows? A couple years later, there was no room. Four years ago, we were talking about expanding and we found this location. Right now this building is 600,000 square feet.

TVD: Wow, so it serves both as the headquarters and the factory or production site for your company?

DT: Yes.

TVD: Now, you’ve always been the one running the company. You know, engineering the sauce and all of that. But it sounds like your son is now the president, right?

DT: Right.

TVD: So what role do you have today?

DT: I don’t really understand.

TVD: What’s your job at the company? Are you still involved on a daily level?

DT: I can tell you that from the beginning until now that my main job was production, not taking of the sales. Because during the production, you can make a good product. You can get the market and how to lower the cost. For automation, for the equipment, then you can lower the cost.

TVD: Where did you learn all these skills?

DT: Not from school.

TVD: So just by doing?
DT: Yeah. I like to learn. I have to do the plumbing so I called the plumbing company to fix it and I watched how they do it so the next time I would do it by myself.

TVD: Besides your son who was born in 1975, you also have a daughter right? What year was she born?

DT: In 1981.

TVD: So after you came to America?

DT: Yes.

TVD: Obviously their life is very different from yours, growing up in Vietnam. Was this business, that you were building, something you always had in mind for your children?

DT: My business will pass over to them. It already passed over to them and they will handle it. But it doesn’t mean they have to follow the way I do what I do. If I wanted them to step on my way, I wouldn’t have sent them to college to study. Now they go to college to learn something. They need to do something different from me. To update.

TVD: Where did they go? Where did they go to school?

DT: My son went to Cal Poly. Business…

TVD: Is it Business Administration?

DT: Human Resource. Business control…

TVD: So he was looking...he was probably inspired by your business background. How about your daughter?

DT: My daughter graduates from Boston.

TVD: Boston University or Boston College?

DT: Boston University. She came back after she graduated to USC for the teaching, master degree in teaching. She’s a teacher.
TVD: Oh, she’s a teacher by training.

DT: Yeah.

TVD: What did you hope? Did you have expectations for what your children should be or do when they grow up? Like when they were small children, did you encourage them to study anything?

DT: No. I never force them. I’m too busy with handling the business. My wife takes care of them. What they want to learn, what they want to do, my wife took care of it.

TVD: Do you ever share with your kids your story, your experiences?

DT: Yeah. They know that, but not very detailed like today.

TVD: Do they know about your time spent in the army?

DT: It’s not dangerous and you didn’t have to fight so it was nothing to mention. (unintelligible) You cannot go anywhere you want.

TVD: Did your children ever ask you about your past? Do you think that... you know, raising them here in America...Do you raise them to be American mostly or Asian American or Chinese American or Vietnamese?

DT: Almost American. Everything is almost American.

TVD: What do you mean?

DT: Like the food and the wedding parties and the moving. For example, the wedding, American wedding, for us. We need a Chinese restaurant to party, but they don’t want it because they want you to share the happiness with them (unintelligible). A lot of people didn’t like it.

TVD: What language do you speak to your kids?

DT: You can say that I speak mixed Chinese, but my Chinese isn’t really Chinese. When I lived in Vietnam, I couldn’t speak Vietnamese properly. If I did *chính tài*, maybe I get it wrong. Right
now I’m an American citizen, but my English is too bad. Not ever perfect. So we mix it together. Cantonese, not Vietnamese, English, mostly Cantonese.

TVD: What language do you speak to your wife in?

DT: Cantonese. Taiwanese.

TVD: Do they understand? They speak it, you say. Did you ever send them to a language school?

DT: I tried it. I remember...my business, I learn what I want to learn.

TVD: Do you have grandkids?

DT: Yeah.

TVD: How many grandkids do you have?

DT: Two.

TVD: And they’re little?

DT: Yeah.

TVD: Thinking about the future and when your grandkids are older, what do you want to know about you? What is important?

DT: I never thought like that, because, maybe for me, I never thought how my father, where my grandfather comes from or how they’re...I don’t have any idea that they will try to find it, my story.

TVD: Do you think maybe your kids or your grandkids might try to find out someday?

DT: Yeah.

TVD: If you could speak to them directly, what would you tell them that is important to know about you or your experience? What lessons did you learn?
DT: Maybe not really true. I’m Chinese but I don’t like it. I go to China or something like that. Chinese mother. In Taiwan, I go to the country. I have two moms. When I went to Vietnam, my mother took care of me. So they help me and gave me that life. Today I say thank you, thank you mom. I do something for Vietnam. I do something for China because I’m Chinese and I lived in Vietnam, but no. The story you cannot change. Today I will be here. I am here, my children are here. I want to say thank you to America. A lot of people ask me to invest in Vietnam or China, I say no. I don’t go anywhere, just here.

TVD: Have you been back to Vietnam or Hong Kong?

DT: No. Hong Kong, yes. But not Vietnam.

TVD: Why not?

DT: The one who knew me is not there anymore. The older ones passed away and the younger ones don’t know me. So, I’m too busy. I enjoy my business, my success, rather than visiting there or doing something like that. It’s not exciting to see that.

TVD: And you mentioned that you have your American citizenship, right?

DT: Yeah.

TVD: When did you get your citizenship?

DT: ‘84 or ‘85

TVD: So very soon after.

DT: Because we are refugee. When we came here, we had a green card and they sent a note or a letter and you went to apply to be a citizen. Everything seems fine, nothing special designed to get it.

TVD: When you got your citizenship, did your wife also do that with you?

DT: Yes.
TVD: Then by default, your son became a citizen.

DT: Right.

TVD: And of course your daughter was born here.

DT: Right.

TVD: You are all American citizens.

DT: Right.

TVD: In several hundreds years, let’s say, when your children marry non-Asians and they grew up in the US or maybe even other countries, maybe they moved overseas...When they look back at your journey, how you rebuilt your life in another country, I think that they will learn a lot, in terms of what it took to start over and to start a business and to become successful. It sounds like you raised your children to have a lot of freedom, freedom you might not have had when you were growing up. For your kids, is it important, do you think, for them to maintain some of the customs or traditions of being Asian? Maybe not necessarily Chinese or Vietnamese but things like respect for the elders or having a family altar, any of those things important for you to keep?

DT: No, it’s not important. Really not important. He’s my son-in-law. He’s not Chinese.

TVD: When you think about, you know, maybe not the language or the altar, but the idea that kids need to take of their parents and respect their elders, which is something I hear a lot of the older generations talk about. It gets sort of diluted or it gets faded away.

DT: Yeah. You can say that. The way we keep it like that, for me, I never thought about that. I make money and I give them money, even my wife or my children. I never ask how you spent your money or watching them spend their money. If to them, it is up to them to spend it. So give them their life. They do what they want to. I never said “You can do this or not,” because right now every year is different like the old song. They sing a song that’s different and new. We
enjoy the old songs, but the new songs, we don’t know how to sing them or what they mean. So with the time difference, you cannot say that they will be like me. I never created it that way. I never think like that.

TVD: I think one last question for you and that’s thinking about your own life and your future. You’re still young. Do you have any more goals or things you want to accomplish for yourself or things you want to do even?

DT: No. But what’s good for me is that I need to walk every morning. Wake up and find something to do. My children, my second generation, they need to do something. It doesn’t matter if it’s right or wrong, but they need to do it.

TVD: So do you have any plans to retire?

DT: No.

TVD: You’ll just keep working?

DT: Almost retired. Spent my time. My time, I don’t spend at home. I come here to spend my time to sit and do something. But because I still can walk, they still let me to do it. I believe if I’m not here they still can handle and run it.

TVD: Is there any last thing you want to say that we haven’t covered in the interview that you want to say about your life?

DT: No. My thinking is very simple. I don’t want everyone to listen to me and do the way I’m doing. Most parents set the children for law school or engineering. It’s up to everyone. You’re happy mostly. In your life, you feel happy. That’s it.

TVD: And so do you feel, at this point in your life, you’re happy and fulfilled?

DT: Yeah, I’m happy.

TVD: Ok, so I think I’m going to end there.
DT: Ok.

TVD: Thank you so much.