CD: My name is Cody Duong and today is May 26, 2015. I am going to interview Minh Duong and we are at Minh Duong’s house in Mission Viejo, California, and this interview is for the Vietnamese-American Heritage Foundation 500 Oral History Project.

CD: Let’s start off with your name. What’s your name?

MD: Yes. My name is Minh Duong. I live in city of Mission Viejo, California. I was born in October 7, 1967.

CD: Where were you born?

MD: Vietnam.

CD: Where did you grow up? Describe your hometown.

MD: Yes, I was from the middle of the country. It’s Quang Tri, Hue, Vietnam, as a farmer—a farmer boy. Go to school in the morning. I work with my mom during the afternoon to the rice field—on the rice field.

CD: What are your parents’ names? Can you describe them?

MD: Yes. My dad was Cau, My mom was Sy. They passed seven years ago in Vietnam.

CD: Where have you lived in Vietnam besides the city?

MD: Shortly before I left Vietnam, I was in city of Saigon for about two years, almost two years, and then I escaped from Vietnam late 1981.

CD: What are some of your favorite childhood memories?

MD: Back home, go to school in the morning, in the afternoon I watch the buffalo, you know, the part of the childhood in the countryside, play, and then help my mom with the rice, potato, you know, garden stuff.

CD: Did your family have traditions of music or storytelling?

MD: Not music, but storytelling. At night, my mom or my grandma was telling us how in the past, present, you know, one king after the other, how we raised the children, how the political change from one king to the other.

CD: What were the main industries in your hometown?

MD: Rice, you know? 80% is rice, and then about 10, 15% is potato—sweet potato.
CD: What were your neighbors in Vietnam like?

MD: Oh, neighbors is very quiet. One house to the other is pretty long distance because we have a big big land, so it’s not like right here, you have to walk about 100 feet to get to the next neighbor, 100 or 150 feet.

CD: What kinds of local gatherings and events were there back in your neighborhood?

MD: Mostly we dam gio [death anniversary], I’m not sure what dam gio is, but we remember the elder generation. The day they passed away, we gather together with food and then pay respect, and everybody, you know, enjoy the food and have a beer, a tea.

CD: How did you celebrate Tet?

MD: Tet is pretty, very very big in Vietnam—the biggest, I shall say. Tet is usually the first day of the month in January, the first month of the year. Begins on the 15th, the 20th of December, we prepare for Tet already, just like Christmas right here, you know, take a week, two, or three weeks to prepare for Tet, so Tet is the biggest celebration that we have in Vietnam.

CD: How did you celebrate birthdays back in your home?

MD: Birthday from my hometown, there wasn’t any hardly ever people celebrate birthday because we kind of poor so we don’t have the financial and, you know, the thing to celebrate. We may remember the birthdate but we don’t gather to celebrate birthday like we do over here.

CD: How did you celebrate funeral?

MD: Funeral, that also the very very big in Vietnam. Funeral is very big, you know, regardless of where people are, where they may be doing, whatever business. When somebody die, he/she all over around from Saigon, (unintelligible), Hue, they have to come back and pay respect and then spend a day or two with the family, with relative, and, you know, they go back to their normal life.

CD: What jobs have you had in Vietnam?

MD: It’s not an actual job. I go to school in the morning in the village and I help my mom in the afternoon. You know, just watch the buffalo, help my mom clean the grass so potato can grow better. That’s it.

CD: How is your schooling and education in Vietnam?

MD: I left when I was fifteen, so there wasn’t a lot of study for me to do. I guess there was, but for my situation, I didn’t do much until I got to California, United States over here.

CD: So there wasn’t school in Vietnam?

MD: They do have school, they do have school, but from where we live, it very hard because the distance, plus the — it’s pretty far. From first grade to eighth grade, yes, you walk about a mile and half to go to school, but from ninth and tenth grade to twelfth grade, it’s about 15, 18 miles to go to school, and then back there it’s no motorcycle, it’s lucky if we have a bicycle. I didn’t have a bicycle, so I have to walk, so school pretty very very tough for many of us.
CD: So it was more difficult to go to school?

MD: Yes, yes, yes, so that’s why lot of children my age do not go to school because so difficult, the distance. Plus, we don’t have all the resource, you know, we didn’t have enough food to survive, so the walk in the morning for, you know, that how many miles to get to school and in the afternoon go back, it extremely hard.

CD: Let’s talk about family and kinship.

MD: Yes.

CD: What do you remember most about your parents and grandparents when you were a child?

MD: Yes, I was lucky enough to very close with my grandma when my dad was in prison: communist prison. So I stayed most of the time with my grandma and my mom, so they teach me a lot about life, you know. When the communists took over our country, many, many, many of us very poor, so we actually didn’t have enough food to eat, so we stay together, hang together, do whatever we can to survive.

CD: Alright. How many siblings do you have?

MD: I have one older sister, and me, and then my two younger sisters.

CD: What are their names?

MD: Yes, my older sister is Tang, my younger sister next to me is Hieu, and then my youngest sister is Hanh. They all live in Vietnam now, still in Vietnam, but in better place. They’re in Saigon instead of from the middle of the Vietnam.

CD: What do you know about your family name Duong?

MD: Back home, Duong is a little bit famous where we came from. That’s the biggest name around the village.

CD: Alright, what languages do you speak besides English and Vietnamese?

MD: That’s all, Vietnamese, you know, basically. I learned a little bit of English when I was in the refugee camp in Malaysia, and then of course when I got to California I have more opportunity go to school, and then pick up from there.

CD: What languages do you use in different settings, like home, school, or work?

MD: Kind of both, home, school, and work. I learned a lot from work too, you know.

CD: What memorable stories have your family members told you in the past?

MD: I grew up as a young boy, and then early teen, Vietnam was under heavy war between the communists and us. They always fight, so we have bad—not bad memories—but we think about war and how to prepare, how to stay alive, you know, during the war.

CD: What occupations did your family members hold in the past?

MD: Yes, sir. My dad was political officer during the war. He used to work for the South, and the South is American government support, against the North, but my dad was political officer, I shall say, for the South Vietnamese government. And my mom: just a
housewife.

CD: So she had no job?

MD: No, housewife. But when the communists took over our country, we lost our country. My dad was imprisoned, just like many, many men work for the South. And then my mom has to work, so we went back to the farm and then we raised chicken, duck, and then we do rice field.

CD: What about your siblings? Did they have any jobs in Vietnam?

MD: No, we all do farm work. Yes.

CD: How much education has your family had in the different generations?

MD: Like I said, during the war, it’s very difficult, very very difficult to—let’s say — to reach twelfth grade, you know. To be able to reach even tenth grade is pretty pretty hard too, so I think my dad was reaching high school. My mom is different story. Her mom passed away when she was a little girl, and of course, her dad passed away when she was just very very young too. So she has to stay with her uncle. And you know how it is. She didn’t have an opportunity to go to school at all. Yeah, that’s to answer your question.

CD: How did your grandparents come to meet and marry?

MD: Way back there, arranged. Arrangement, you know. Yeah. That’s all I can remember. They’re arranged. If one parent know the other parent, “Oh you have one son, I have one daughter”—you know, they arranged marriage.

CD: What about your parents?

MD: I think the same. I think the same. That’s what my mom was telling me. In the village, my mom was a little girl staying with her uncle, and then my grandma—a little girl, nice looking little girl, pleasant, and then my grandma went over and asked that uncle that, you know, to arrange the marriage between my dad and my mom.

CD: In Vietnam or America, does your family hold reunions or gatherings for family?

MD: We do gathering, hold reunion, especially dam gio. We pay respect to my grandpa, my grandma, and great-great- grandpa and grandma. That’s when we gather together all the brother and sister, uncle, aunt, relatives, all the nieces and nephews have to come together to celebrate.

CD: What kinds of gatherings do we have in America?

MD: In America, it’s a different story, way way different. In America, we celebrate all American holidays, of course, and then besides that, we have dam gio, too, and also birthday, many many birthdays, yeah. So many many gathering, celebration to do over here. We love it.

CD: What activities take place at these family gatherings?

MD: Take place?

CD: Yes.

MD: What do you mean?
CD: Like, what do we do at the gatherings? Or what do you do at the gatherings?

MD: Okay, well we prepare good food, you know, clean up the house, set up the tables, and then cook, and then go order food from the store, and then, you know, we gather together and enjoy, remember.

CD: What kinds of stories do you tell at the gatherings and other parents tell at the gatherings?

MD: We talk, we remember the past, we make jokes, you know, have fun, you know, share work experience, share, you know, children’s’s stories. Yes, that’s we normally do.

CD: How did you meet your spouse?

MD: My wife, yes. I met my wife at—my wife’s actually my friend’s younger sister. I went to visit him when he got off the United States Navy. Four years contract, and then went over for visit and have, you know, have dinner and stuff like that so he introduced me to his sister from they just arrived from Vietnam. So we get to know each other, you know, since then. That’s how we, you know, get up to here.

CD: How many years after you met her did you marry?

MD: I think about, a little bit over two years I dated, when we tied the knot, May 1, 1993. I started to know her very early 1991, get married 1993.

CD: Describe your children if you have any.

MD: Yes I do. I have two boys and one girl. His name is Kenny Duong, my oldest. He’s now just turned 21. He’s at UC Irvine also. And my second boy is Cody Duong. He’s 19 and a half, he’s at second year at UC Irvine also. And then I have a little girl, she’s Mimi. Her name’s Mimi and she’s just turned 17. She’s a junior at Tesoro High School. I love them and I think they’re good kids.

CD: Have you talked to any of your children about your history?

MD: Yes, I try to share with them what I’ve been through, you know, in Vietnam: how poor we were during the war, life extremely difficult under communist government, and then when I escaped. I escaped by myself, and I came to the United States by myself also, with no parents. So it was extremely hard for me to survive, but I made it through. I try to tell my children what I’ve been through so hopefully they can learn something and hopefully they can take that and do the best, get the highest education possible, and then, you know, be a good person, to be a good person to themselves, to their family, and to their children in the future.

CD: Okay, let’s talk about culture, tradition, and religion. Does your family have any special sayings or expressions?

MD: Back there, I think 75% of the Vietnamese people are under Buddhist. They don’t go to temple every Sunday like the Catholic does for the church, but we go to temple once a while, maybe at least once a month during the Ram. Ram is the fifteenth day of the month when the moon is fully shine.

CD: Are there any special family traditions, customs, songs, or foods?

MD: Foods, yes. When we gather together for dam gio, especially on the Tet—Tet is New