Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

HT: This is Hanh Truong with VietStories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC, Irvine. Today is February 8th, 2019. I will be interviewing Tran Tu at her home in Garden Grove, California.

TT: Ok.

HT: So you were born in Vietnam; how would you describe your childhood in Vietnam?

TT: Before 1975, [I] lived very normally. Had a good life.

HT: How would you describe your family life? Your home?

TT: My parents and we had 7 kids--5 girls and 2 boy. I have a brother--2 brother and 4 more sisters. Right? Including me, like 5 (laugh). Yeah, and then we had a little grocery store, but I like to work in the factory and I worked in the factory.

HT: Did you go to school in Vietnam?

TT: Yeah, I graduate high school. Especially English. I graduated English too.

HT: You learned English in Vietnam?

TT: Vietnam, yes.

HT: Do you remember what year you graduated?

TT: 1972.

HT: What did you like to do in Vietnam? Did you have any hobbies?
TT: I learned a lot of stuff, like sewing clothing and doing a lot of stuff but I don’t remember.

I’m too old now. I mean a long time ago (laughing, background noise begins, neighbor nearby fixing their yard). And then finally, I just choose to be working in the factory. But I don’t know.

I like to live a calm life, a normal life.

HT: And then you did escaped Vietnam, what was the reason--

TT: And then after their revolution, right?

HT: The revolution?

TT: (nods) People doesn’t know about the Cộng Sản. So they feel happy and have fireworks and everything. And after that, oh my God, the life going down and down and down.

HT: Once the North won.

TT: (nods)

HT: How did it affect you? Did it affect your life?

TT: A lot. They called it the--how do say ‘công nhân làm chủ?’ So the worker to be a owner. So, if you are owner, you work you don’t have to get paid (laugh). That means you work for free. How can you support yourself? How can you support the family? How can you eat? What do you eat? Nothing. And everything need to be--everything controlled by the government. So, people are very difficult to believe. So, everybody planned to get a new life. There were a lot of boat people. The first boat people, they went to Australia. They got very good treatment. And then they sent mail home and from that time, everybody are planning to escape. To be the boat people.

HT: Did your whole family decide to escape together?
TT: But you have to have money. They don’t take money, they take gold. They don’t take American dollar, but they want gold. Some people, they have to pay 17 ounce or 18 ounce of gold; they have to pay like that for one seat for yourself.

HT: On the boat.

TT: On the boat. People almost put all of their property to change it to gold to go. So whoever have money can go. A lot of people wanted to go but if you have money--yes.

HT: So your family--

TT: My family very difficult. After ‘75, everybody very difficult. The life very difficult.

HT: Your family specifically?

TT: Most. Most. A lot of people, not only our family.

HT: So what made you decide to leave [Vietnam]?

TT: Well I don’t think I can leave because I don’t have no money. But luckily my friend, they ask me to go. I said, “I don’t have money. If you want me to go, fine, can I pay you back when I arrive the camp and I work or I do something and I can pay back. But I can pay a little bit right now. My family doesn’t have too much.” It’s a big family. 7 people plus parents--9 people. Where do you get that big number [of money]. See? First of all, they want 16 ounce of gold, they change less and less. When I go, they cost me 5 ounce, I think. 5 ounce of big gold. You know 1 once is $3,000. That’s a huge number. And then my mom, your grandma, she collect all the little golds (motions her hands around the base of her fingers and wrists) all the pieces--

HT: Jewelry?
TT: All the jewelries. To pay for, a little bit, for me and then my friend covered everything. So when I go back here and I got the money, and I work and I pay [them] back.

HT: How did you feel about leaving your family?

TT: Sad. When they [her friend’s family] agree to cover me to go and then we planned to go. I don’t know; I saw people running around with the paper and asked the date--they been changing--we started from May and the date keep changing and changing until September. Because they said that they don’t pay enough to the government. A lot of problems. And then finally, all of a sudden, “Go! Let’s go!” And I just grabbed a bag with a pair of clothing. That’s it and go.

HT: Just clothes?

TT: Yes (Tran takes out a picture from her photo album to show the item of clothing she packed). And that’s it. This is a pair--a set--of clothes and then I wear a set of working clothes. I said, “I go to work.” You know the neighborhood are watching.

HT: Are they told that if they see something they have to tell?

TT: Yes, they will. If they see something they will. I said, “Time to go to work!” (laughs) And then the people come to pick me up. And they sent me to one of the store and I’m waiting for all my friends and the kid (points to picture of a boy in the photo album). We all start to go. And they said that they took to Saigon to one of the stream, the little stream with the small boat. [The organizers said.] “You guys take the taxi, ok?” [‘taxi’ refers to the small boat that would take people to the large, main boat]. Because one taxi, one little boat, only can bring 1 or 2 people. So we have 5. And me and my friend and her little brother and the other brother with his nephew. So 5 of us with 2 little boats. And they [unintelligible--00:10:20] on the stream into the little sea. From 11 P.M. they bring us until 5 o’clock in the morning. And we can see the sun rise and we see the big boat. [They said.] “Oh, very big! Big boat! Big boat!” (laugh). We thought, we had
in the small boat and we see the big ship and it was said that it was big. But actually it was very small. If you can compare with all the boats in the sea, [the boat was] like a one cent in the ocean. And then they gave us a pass, they called it a pass, and then we hang the pass--some people they just break the little boat and they climb up to the guy [in the big boat]. They go, “Finally!” And then everybody rush up, so have no choice, they got to let them in. They planned 180 people with 23 yard of boat--like this house with 400 people in here. Very crowded. First of all, everybody were all on the top. Half and half. Half of the guys on top and the lady all on the bottom.

HT: Were they all boat people too? They were escaping?

TT: Yes, they all paid for the bill too. Everybody paid for their seats. Only the 200 something people, they heard from everywhere, they jump into there [the boat]. And then the boat, when they go over, they have a lot of--how do you call the guy in the sea? They check up the--they use a light. The tài cộng, the captain, “Hey, everybody get down!”

HT: Like the police of the sea?

TT: Uh huh, the police in the sea. Yes, the guy, “Everybody get down! Come on!” And everybody jump up and down and no room to sit down. And then everybody have to stand up and turn off all the light and let the boat flow through the line--how do you call the international line between Vietnam sea and--

HT: The border?

TT: The border of the sea. I think they talk to them and pay them something and they let [us] go.

HT: So by then you’re in Thailand?
TT: No. And then all of a sudden, the captain, they lose the compass, something—they don’t know where they going. And then they saw the hải tặc.

HT: Pirate?

TT: The pirates to rob the boat and this captain running [unintelligible--00:14:37]. They said they planned to go to Hong Kong or Philippine and now they have the Thailand pirate chasing [them] and they running.

HT: Trying to get away.

TT: And then they lost direction. And they run on the sea--day, night, day, night. I don’t know how many days--like 4 days. And then they met Panama--the people that try to get the oil--đầu khoan Panama. And then they give us water.

HT: The oil workers?

TT: [nods] Give us water and give us cookie. And people eat it. Oh my God, was so thirsty. And they have to drink because, in the boat, you can see the teaspoon--for the coffee, the little baby spoon--everyday people [get] only one spoon to wet their lip. That’s it. For 5 days. And on the 6th day, the night of the final night--the last night--I don’t remember how many nights--the last night and then we,’Oh, we arrival; we see the island!’” Everybody really happy. But it’s very dark. They said, “Ok, you guys going to need to stay in the boat until morning we can see the way to get in the island because they have a lot of the stone from the sea. If the boat hit it, it will explode, people will (motions insinuating death), that’s it. They scared; they worried. Everybody there had to stay overnight in the sea, wait until morning. And see Indonesia have the guy from the police and then guide the boat to get into the Pulau camp. To the Cucu, Dau Cucu [name of refugee camp].
HT: And what country was that--

TT: Indonesia

HT: You said that there were pirates getting you; did they ever catch up to you? Or did you manage to get away?

TT: Yeah, I think they catch up, and then they said pay 10 grand--10 grand American money. And when they jump into the [boat], the girl and the ladies they use things to mess up their face.

HT: Using what?

TT: The boat, the dust, and everything--mess up their face. And they afraid because Thailand pirates are very bad. They killing or they rape. And when they open the trunk, the smell from this and then they, “Nah, nevermind.” They let go.

HT: And then that’s when you continued till you reached the camp?

TT: And then the captain continued running. They chasing, they kept to too but when they go into the boat and they see all old ladies, so messy and so dirty. “Nah.” And then they just let go and then we go out. And when they move-in they slap their hands, “Oh thank, thank God.”

HT: How did you feel throughout the trip on the boat?

TT: I felt dizzy. I stayed in there and I like to sleep. Anytime I sleep, I’m dreaming of grandpa [her father] giving me food; I go with my friends to drink lemonade. When you sleep, you feel like you eat. And then you wake up, you feel full. But actually, I don’t know. Until, when we get into the boat, they call on people to get up and get in the bridge, all the way to the camp [sighs] like drunk people. It’s sea sick. They can’t walk straight; [they] walk like we on the boat. There were three--1 boy and 2 girl--probably they were so thirsty that they have some infection or something. They die; they pass away.
HT: So out of everyone on that boat, only 2 people died?

TT: Two girl and one boy. They all young. They all 18. And then they go to the camp and pass in the camp and people bury them in camp.

HT: But during your journey on the boat, no one died?

TT: That’s the first. No. And then after that people they count names, they give a bag of food. The refugee--how do you call Cao Quý [needs translation--20:26]--they donate. They give us one bag of food, like a kilo of rice and one can of pate and then no salt.

HT: Socks?

TT: Salt; the salt.

HT: Salt!

TT: Nothing! Everything we cooked very light! We looked for salt. And then they say, “How about we take the water from the sea to cook? And then they’ll have some salt.” (laugh) And then have don’t have no bathroom; you have to go all the way to the bridge over there to have bathroom and stay over there. And they have water. A lot of water. When I arrive over there, use a can--some kind of can--turn on the water and drink, drink, drink. Wow! 3 cans of water! Wow, because it’s been like how many days? 5 days, 6 nights--no, 5 nights, 6 days--eat nothing, drink nothing.

HT: And you were in the boat with how many people?

TT: 427. And then the water so filthy too. The spoon of water, the little spoon, you can see the little things are running around but you still have to drink it or you’ll die. So thirsty, now. Then one of the family, the kids are crying, crying, crying and then one of the lady pee and feed them and alive them.
HT: In the boat or at the camp?

TT: In the boat. No water. The lady pee and then feed the 5 kids and then the kids alive. If not, they die. You had to drink everything. You cannot drink the sea water--so salty. And then when the last night, when I sit there, and then all of a sudden, I don’t know where, running lemon. Wow! Everybody asked for it. I said, “Ok.” I used a knife, I cut a piece for everybody and I save a little piece for me. The first time I feel the lemon, it’s sweet [laugh]. It’s sweet! Oh, wow. No wonder everybody [laugh]. Wow. First time I said I hate lemon but the taste, wow, very sweet. Probably that support me to overnight, in the morning to the boats.

And then I drank 3 cans of water. And I lay on the floor. I said, “I don’t care.” Because the floor you can straighten your leg, straight your back, your hand--ahh, feel good (lays back on the couch to demonstrate). When you in the boat like this (crouches her body with her hands together at her chest) almost all week. And then they call name and they give you a bowl, spoon, and a pot so you can cook things and eat. We live in the camp like a month--something--and we pick up the--they don’t have no nothing--we had to pick up the branch. We’re like living in the nature. Bring the branch and use the can food to make it like the stove and then put the can and use the branch and match it up and fire and cook water. We live in nature. And we would pick up all the leave--that people would leave there before--the bran or the chili or lemon--all kind of stuff that they gone and they leave the stuff over there [the camp]. We pick it, we cut it, we cook, we eat. Because they only give you one can of pate for 5 days. How can you eat 5 days for 1 can can?

HT: For each person or for your group?

TT: One person.
HT: And you were still with the 5 people, right?

TT: Uh huh (nods). So when we go to Cucu, 5 people together, and one day, we open one bag [of food], we share. Lucky we have 5 people, so, 5 day ok. We just finish this bag and we get another bag. And then cut it down and share it all.

HT: Were you able to contact your family back home?

TT: They [camp leaders] give you some letters, some postcards, and you can write something, so they mailed it. But I have to send to Hong Kong--from Hong Kong to Vietnam. They said they don’t direct to Vietnam.

HT: So your postcards went to Hong Kong first and then to Vietnam?

TT: Hong Kong--uncle [her older brother] in Hong Kong send to Vietnam. I sent to Hong Kong to uncle--Phat Khu Phu [Chinese way of saying maternal uncle]--to Hong Kong and then Hong Kong send to Vietnam.

HT: How come they don’t do it directly?

TT: It takes like 3 or 4 months and my friend, they don’t have no family [in Hong Kong] and they can not send, and then I have to tell my brother let--in Vietnam--let my friend’s family know that we ok--in camp already. And then from the camp we settle down a little bit and they have a big boat--a real big boat, a metal boat--the other one a wooden boat. The boat that we escaped is wooden boat. And the big ship, they take us--that ship can carry like thousands and thousands of people--we from Cucu to Galang [another refugee camp]. It took a couple hours to Galang. And then they read name. They go by capitulary [meant alphabetical]--ABC--and I’m the last one. Some họ [last name] Vuong--’V’--the last họ Vo--but mine a ‘T’ still the last.

HT: Is this camp still in Indonesia?
TT: I think it still have camp but nobody over there.

HT: I meant is that camp in Indonesia?

TT: Yes. We went to Indonesia. And then we stay over there, we heard a lot of bad news too.

HT: About?

TT: About people that escaped. Some boat they don’t make it too good. They boat--a couple hundred people in there--and then they hit on something and the boat--apart--

HT: Split?

TT: Drop into the sea. And some boat they out of food. They have to eat people. People eat people. And when they come to Indonesia--in the camp--they, the police, make a fence and “These people--these people are eating people.” They have a special line for them. When you see their eyes like (her eyes roll up).

HT: They didn’t look--

TT: Right. They don’t look right. Probably the psychology.

HT: How did that make you feel when you saw them? And when you heard these stories?


HT: Do you know what happened to those people?

TT: They [the cannibalists] still have check up and do something and, probably, they see if they have any relative in any country to pick them up. They still treat them equal. They have their equal rights. So they have check up; they have everything. They still have all the treatment. But they [camp leaders] make the fence. Sometimes if people eat people, they have germ or something. They don’t want to spread the germ or anything.
HT: How was your life in the 2nd camp?

TT: First of all, very difficult. And then a lot of people gone and then they leave a lot of stuff for you. And you feel like--

HT: Gone as in like left [the camp]?

TT: They went to Australia, they went to Canada, they went to America, all the little country they asked for. When you go over there [refugee camp], you have to sign some paper, “Where you do want to go?”

HT: Where did you want to go?

TT: First of all, I said that I can go anywhere. And then when I met one of my family--not real close--they said, “Oh, your brother already--Tai Di Mu [her older sister; Chinese name for aunt that is your mother’s older sister] and Khu Phu [her younger brother; Chinese name for uncle that is your mother’s older brother] qua ben [came to] America. So I changed my mind; I want to go to America.

HT: They left before you did?

TT: Yes, they went 1979.

HT: Why didn’t you go with them? Money?

TT: Well, Tai Di Mu [her older sister], their family are rich, so they pay for Khu Phu. They only pay for Khu Phu. That’s it. After the revolution and North Vietnam win and then the economy are going down.

HT: Economy?

TT: (Nods) Life’s very bad over there.

HT: In Vietnam?
TT: *(Nods)* Even I work in the factory—I work 1 day and I can buy 1 meal in the breakfast and that’s it. And how about the afternoon and the nighttime? What do I eat?

HT: And that was during when the North won?


HT: From the United States?

TT: From whatever country when you go to Vietnam, you have to report. If you don’t report, they take all of your money. They took $1, 200--something like that--$1,000 or $1,200--I don’t remember. I say, “Why I have to report? I went to Hong Kong, I went to everywhere, they don’t check my money.” They [Vietnam] are not opening. Right now, no problem. You can take money, go back, no problem. But not over the number.

HT: So when you were in the 2nd camp and you decided to go to United States--

TT: Australia call me, asked me to go to Australia. I said no. I want to wait for America. And then Canada called me too--called me to interview to get into Canada. I said no I don’t want to go Canada; it’s so cold over there. I want to go to America. People go over there [the camp], a couple months are gone, a couple months and gone.

HT: From the camp.

TT: Go over there, you sign up, you have your family, they pick you up right away. Some not even a week.

HT: How about the people that were with you? The 5 people? Did they sign up for the United States too?
TT: No they signed up for Canada. They have family in Canada. They want to go to Canada.

HT: Did they leave before you?

TT: Yes. They signed up and filled the paper and they gone. They stay in 5 months--I think--and I had to stay for a few more months and then I go.

HT: Were you alone?

TT: Uh huh.

HT: Did you have any friends to pass time with?

TT: Yes, Helen. Yes, a lot of friend over there. When they come they say hello and that’s it. Just common friend--regular friend. Just say, “Hello, hello.” And then they make company--actually it’s a company--not a friend. And we cook, we share the cook, and we make food and we shared it. Because it’s just a temporary place.

HT: Was it comfortable?

TT: Yes, very comfortable. Before they give you 20 liter per day.

HT: Water?

TT: Yes, water. And you can use whatever. If you can carry 10 gallons--20 gallons at a time, 40 gallons, whatever you can fill up, you can take. Before, you only have 20 liter. You cannot take a shower. How can you take a shower? (Motions pouring water over her body) hai gao het chon [two spoonfuls and you’re out of water]. How about cooking? You have to eat. Cooking rice you have the water. And then drinking.

HT: So the first camp was the one that--
TT: No, the second camp--the second camp everything is the limit. And the first one they don’t limit you. They just let you relax and comfortable with the camp first. And the second one is everything is under control. They control everything. Until people are gone a lot--have a lot of space--you can live the whole long palace--(laugh) nobody. And then the police over there are very serious. People are fighting. When they catch, they beat on them very bad. So no stealing, no nothing. Just like living in the heaven. Very nice. You don’t have to worry about food, you don’t worry about money, you don’t worry about anything.

HT: The second camp?

TT: Uh huh. First of all, you worry about water and then when a lot of people gone, you have plenty of water.

HT: Are all of the people at the camp, were they all Vietnamese refugees?

TT: Yes. They all Vietnamese. And they come and they gone; they come and they gone. A lot of people come, gone, come, gone. I still there, “How come so long? 8 months!”

HT: When did you come to the United States?

TT: Khu Phu made a sponsor and then they live in Mississippi and they fight with the owner [of their house/also their sponsor]--the owner very bad. Want their labor--work--and don’t pay too much. And very cold over there too. Snowing all--when they went there it was snowing time. So they fight with the owner and then they leave, they owner get mad and drop my papers. She doesn’t want to respond no more. You got to have a sponsor. They sponsor--Tai Di Mu and Khu Phu. When they had problem and he drop my paper. And then in camp, they have [need translation 40:18] that means if a lot of country don’t pick you up, America will. A lot of people, if you don’t go here, there, there--other country don’t pick you up--and then America will interview you and pick you.
HT: So you ended not being sponsored by Khu Phu?

TT: No. One sponsor in San Francisco, they sponsor me over there.

HT: Do you know them?

TT: No, I don’t know them. They call a [need translation 41:00] the church. I think it’s a Believe Church. They sponsor a whole bunch of people over. And then they have the agent, they call over the people when they come to America and then they find them their family. Or you want to live in San Francisco? And they will look for house for you and look for job for you and let you stay over there.

HT: What did you do?

TT: I told them that I have family. And they try to find Uncle [her brother; same person as Khu Phu]--find Uncle Kevin. And they find him, they call, and then, “Oh, they find your family!” And on the phone, I talked to Khu Phu. Oh, I remember his voice. (laughs) Very happy. And then they set up the time for me, take the Greyhounds to Santa Ana. They live in Santa Ana.

HT: Not Mississippi?

TT: No, they fight with the Mississippi [home owner] and then they moved to California--they moved to Santa Ana. And then they all live in Santa Ana and I come to Santa Ana too.

HT: Did you live in San Francisco, for a little bit?

TT: About a month.

HT: And so that same year you went to Santa Ana?
TT: Yes. In the camp, they call my name, “Hey! You get ready to leave camp.” I got my name. They called my name. I have to pack and get into the boat. They take to Singapore and they put [her] in Singapore a couple night and then they take to the airport and then fly to San Francisco.

HT: And that was in 1980?

TT: 1981 April. April 8th--I think. They call me and said that, “Yes, you have your name. Get ready to go. Sign the paper for the airplane ticket.” So when I come here [United States] and I have money, I send them the money for my airplane ticket. Yes, they borrow me the money to take the airplane ticket. When they call my name and call Helen too. I said, “Oh! You name too; we all go together!” So we all go together to sign some paper and then we pack and everything give away and then we just take clothing and then to the airport--to the boat and then the boat to Singapore. Singapore they have the bus take to the camp, the temporary camp, and stay over there wait for the flight. In Singapore Tai Di Mu [refers to herself] and Helen take the bus around Singapore. One day. Too small--Singapore very small. Only one day, running around. (laughs) And the Singapore people are so strange. When you sit down to eat, you call, “Pay for it first.” A lot of people eat and then don’t pay. “You guys eat don’t pay! So you have to pay first!” So Helen and I have to pay first and before we eat. (laughs) So strange. A lot of people, they call, they eat, they gone--they don’t pay. And then now make everybody behind worse.

HT: Did Helen go with you to San Francisco and Santa Ana?

TT: Yes, we all go San Francisco and in the camp. But when she go to San Francisco, her sponsor is in Los Angeles--Hao Tong. So they have to fly right away and then she go over there, the camp, only one--

HT: A camp in Los Angeles?
TT: No, a camp in San Francisco. That’s a Navy--actually, it’s not a camp, it’s a Navy camp--the Navy, the soldiers. So cold over there. We have to go over there and the lunch time *(makes ringing sound)* they call everybody to eat lunch. And nighttime, breakfast, lunch and dinner, times up, they just *(makes ringing sound)*, have the bell ring, everybody go over there to get lunch. Because the church donate. It’s free lunch. They have a lot of food. Tasty too. Of course *(laughs)* Because from camp, you never have that big meal and everything. Oh, everything is--wow. All you can eat. When I was in Vietnam, I have only 37 kilo. And then when I go to the camp, I have less than 30 kilo. After the camp, I went to Singapore before, I weighted, I had 47 kilo. In the camp [Navy camp], only 1 week, I raise again! 50 kilo! Like a 130 pound, almost. And then I went to San Francisco to the agent, they find me a room to share with somebody else. And in the meantime, they call to reach the family--my family--to pick me up. So phone Khu Phu--Kevin--and they buy me a bus ticket, Greyhounds, from 9 o’clock in the evening, in the nighttime, and then 7 o’clock to Santa Ana. I sit in the bus, sleep. Very happy when we met. But in Santa Ana, we stayed in Santa Ana a few months. In Los Angeles, I tried to call Helen. We talked to each other in the phone and she said that her uncle in Connecticut, “Let’s go over there to have a job!” I said, “Oh really, ok let’s go!” And then I go with her to Connecticut.

HT: So left your family in Santa Ana.

TT: Santa Ana, yes, I left my brothers and sister. “Let me go over there and find a job. I hate to get welfare or government money. I want to work. I like to work.” So I fly to Connecticut and there’s a sponsor--American man--he take us to the paper factory. I work inside.

HT: Was that the same year when you went to Connecticut? 1981?
TT: Yes, 1981 in November. I went to San Francisco, April. And then, almost May to Santa Ana. Stay in Santa Ana a couple month--I think August. And then Helen and I went to Connecticut. And then we stay in Connecticut and work. And first of all, very good. When the winter time, so cold! But before, we’re young, doesn’t matter--I don’t feel cold. Now, forget it!

HT: Did you live in an apartment?

TT: Yes. They have a lot of house. They have three story house and they rent--very cheap over there to rent. Here [California], like $400, over there like $100, you can rent three, four rooms for yourself.

HT: Were you comfortable?

TT: Very comfortable.

HT: Did you have enough money for food and housing?

TT: Work over there very good. They pay good too. They pay better than California a lot. They cold only. I work over there a week in 1981-82, like $500. And here only $100.

HT: Did you see a lot of Vietnamese people there?

TT: No. They only a couple family! All Italian, Puerto Rico, and German, and even Russia. All different kind--

HT: Did the diversity kind of scare you? Considering you came from being surrounded by Vietnamese people?

TT: No. They see you they, “Hi! How are you doing?” and they talk, talk, talk. And we don’t know their name, nothing. And they very polite, very nice. When you met just (mumbles), “Ok, bye!” and that’s it. And we just know that she live there, he live there, we don’t know their name, they don’t know our name. They only know, “Welcome to this city!” and that’s it! Very kind, very nice over there! Not like here, very cool.
HT: Was there a culture shock though? Like, now, being surrounded by American culture, was there a difference to Vietnamese culture?

TT: No, they don’t. Like a city, you only have one family Vietnamese--in one city. Very little. From here--from Waterbury [city in Connecticut] to Hartford, Hartford only has one market. They call “Chinatown” “Vietnamtown,” only one market. Everything really expensive--the Vietnam food. We all eat American food.

HT: Was it difficult having to basically change your life to American values?

TT: When you’re young, you get used to it. Everything comfortable. Because you met the new life. Everything new. I have no choice.

HT: Were you grateful to be in America?

TT: Yes. Of course, a lot.

HT: Did you ever want to go back to Vietnam?

TT: No. Visit is ok sometimes. Some friends, family. Some old friends work in the factory and we have a lot of friends, I come back to say hello. If they have difficult, we help them a little bit.

HT: Were you ever able to contact your family in Vietnam?

TT: Before, yes. And then my parents passed away and they only have three sisters--your mom--3 younger sisters. And we try to support them and we try to sponsor and that’s why we take all the family over here. Right now we don’t have any family in there.

HT: When did you begin sponsoring to bring your family over?

TT: Once we arrival here [San Francisco], we go to the immigration to make the paper. Because here they so strange.
HT: Here as in Santa Ana?

TT: Santa Ana. They have a lot of Vietnamese community that work a lot papers.

HT: So is it the first time you went to Santa Ana that you talked to immigration? Or after you moved from Connecticut?

TT: No, I stayed in here and I heard that you can sponsor family here right now. I said, “Really?” And then Uncle Kevin stand up, he can sponsor my parents. They said that parents take 2 years--2 or 2 and a half years. So we make the papers. After we make the papers, grandpa [her father] passed away and then grandma [her mother] go too. And we still not through anything. Even I went to Connecticut, I still keep in touch and ask them. I write letters to--I still have some letters--write letters to the Thailand immigration and ask them, “How’s the paper work going for my parents and my sisters?” And they keep saying, “Wait, you have to wait; you have to wait because it’s a lot of papers.” Until my mom passed too, the type of family been dropped, so the younger sister, they have to wait for 15 years. That’s why so long for you guys to come here.

(brief interruption as heater repair men arrive to Tran’s house)

HT: When were you finally able to bring over your family from Vietnam to the United States?

TT: 1997. 1996, they said, “Your family will be here and then you have to pay for how many dollar to buy the ticket for--1995, ok, they said, “Ok, but one of the sisters, she’s pregnant! So have to wait for another year. You have to wait until the baby born. And then check-up and refill all the paperwork and add the child.” (laughs) So, 1997, you guy come. I think 1997--I don’t remember. So long.

HT: I think 1998 is when we finally came here [United States].
TT: So after you born--the baby born and then I had to add paper, photos, I have to run and add this and add another half ticket. The kid have to pay ticket. So we signed a check--write a check--to the immigration--no, I think I buy a ticket. And send it to immigration. And then from them, transfer to Vietnam and then the family--the whole family--comes. And after they came, I have room--the house is very small--the whole family live in one room. Lucky, my 2 kid are so small so you all fit in the house. Until one of sister, she buy a house and your mom buy a house and then they move out. Life goes on. Everybody have growing up, everybody have a job, everybody happy. Life happy, sad, everything.

HT: When started settling into California, after you moved from Connecticut--when did you move to Santa Ana again?

TT: We went to Connecticut and then we live there a couple years. The job is so strange. They only work when they have order to work. And when we don’t have no order, they shut down--they not shut down, they lay off the new people. And then when they have work, they call everybody back to work. 3 month unemployment, 9 month work. And even, over there, I have no car. Have to walk--walk to work. And then snow--the snow to my leg. And I walk through the snow to work. And then sometimes, after the snow, like icy--very slippery--my shoes have nail. Walk, when we on the snow--on the ice--you have to stand careful, if not you will (motions falling down) skate. When you take a shower, you see all the bruise all over your body when you fall. It hurts! But when it’s too cold, you feel nothing. And then when they slow--the company slow--I said, “I don’t wait again. Let’s come back to America [meant California]. Helen and I move back to here--to Santa Ana.

HT: What year was that?
TT: 1982. ‘81–‘82. Actually ‘83. ‘83 and then I moved back to--February ‘82--I move back to--

HT: ‘83?

TT: ‘83, yes. February ‘83 I moved back to Santa Ana. And then I look for a job. I work in the
market--stocking.

HT: Stock market?

TT: Yes, stock worker. Stocking the stuff of the grocery--stocking. Yes, I find a job, I work over
there. And then, when I found one of the job in the factory--drapery--and I quit that job. And I
move to this job. Because that job have no insurance, no nothing. I don’t like that. I like a
permanent job and then they have all benefits--insurance and hour break time. Because when you
work in the market, you never have any break time and work a long time too--from 9 o’clock in
the morning to 9 o’clock in the afternoon.

HT: So this company is textile, like the job you had in Vietnam?

TT: This one is work for sewing. Different. That one [old job in Vietnam] is spinning. Spinning--
they from the cotton, they make thread and from the thread, spin, make cloth--fabrics. And now
this one, the one in America, they use fabric, they cut drapery--make drapery for the hotel, motel,
and all the big hotel, Circus Circus and Holiday Inn. And I been working this company for 35
years.

HT: Did you start the same year you came back?

TT: I start from 1983 August. I start the factory--drapery factory. I work until last year.


TT: 2018 October.

HT: How did you find the job? Did you know someone?
TT: A friend! Some friend, “Oh, we’re hiring! Come on, come one, let’s go!” Just try and then the manager very nice. She know that we don’t know too much English. We use international language more. And inside the factory, they have 3 or 4 workers that are Vietnamese, Chinese. And all are Mexican. So from there, I learned Spanish—talk Spanish, speak Spanish.

HT: Did Helen come with you?

TT: First of all yes. And then the factory we work, they slow. And then she jump to another company and now she work in the bank. She school, she work higher. But I still work in the factory. From worker, to the cutter, sewer, until to be the supervisor. Now to retire.

HT: So you said that you didn’t know that much English. Did you ever go to school for it?

TT: Yes, I tried to but I don’t know why I feel headache any time school. I try to get it, try to remember but the year make the memory weak.

HT: How old were you when you tried to go to school?

TT: In America?

HT: (nods)

TT: I try to school when I went to America, I went to school for a few months until I went to Connecticut and I don’t school no more. And then I come back and I start school and work in the factory and school again in 17th Street. What school is that on—I don’t remember. 17th and Bristol. That’s a big school over there. I start school a few months. And then I got another job and then I have to work day, night, no time to school again.

HT: That other job, was that the job at the factory?

TT: Yes, another factory job.

HT: Do you ever regret it? Do you ever want to go back to school?
TT: I like to work. I don’t know. I like to work. Work, work, work until I cannot work.

HT: So I know you go to Vietnam a lot of vacation; when you go back do you see anything that’s changed from the time that you escaped?

TT: Big change! Really big--huge.

HT: Like what?

TT: Before look like a sad city--dying city in 1980. Like a dying city. Right now everything is fast? than America.

HT: Better than America?

TT: Yes because, if you make money from here to spend over there, yes it’s better. But if you make money over there, you cannot spend like over there. Because their life really cheap. You can spend a couple dollar, fill your stomach. And then here, you cannot. You want good food over there, you spend a few dollar, that’s it. In here, you can’t.

HT: So here we have Little Saigon, so it’s kind of like a little bit of what was Vietnam before the war with Vietnamese people rebuilding themselves with markets.

TT: Yes, they do.

HT: What do you think about Little Saigon? Do you like it? Do you feel home when you see it?

TT: Very difficult to say. If people behave, like America is very good, if they behave--if they was from Vietnam, they will mess up this country. This country everything with law, with rule. They have no rule, no law.

HT: In Vietnam?
TT: Uh huh. They have their rule, their law--and then they forget it. The rule and the law is the police--they say yes is yes, they say no is no. And here, no, the law is the law. American--the law is the law. The law is for the people, not the law only for the big people.

HT: Do you feel at home, here in Santa Ana, or Garden Grove? Do still continue cultural things that you used to do?

TT: Yes, when I went back from Connecticut to Santa Ana, and when we live here, we make enough money and try to buy a house. So we buy that house over there (points to the right, showing the direction of her former home), across the street, and when I get marry, I move out and so I got my own house.

HT: When did you get married?

TT: 1990.

HT: And then when did you have your sons?


HT: Both?

TT: Wilson [her youngest son] 1993. And then that’s it. We live in here before Wilson. So this house is older than Wilson! (laughs).

HT: Do you still continue traditions? Vietnamese and Chinese traditions?

TT: Yes. We still keep some. The problem one, we forget it. We create a new one, easy one, to make life easier. Don’t tie up your life with some old tradition. It will hurt.

HT: What new traditions have you made?
TT: I make life easy. We still follow the tradition but we still make it lighter--simple. Make it simple, make life easy. Not like before there's a lot of problem. If you follow the tradition in Vietnam--the custom--it suck.

HT: What customs did you not like? What you were willing to put away?

TT: I think I put away a lot. If you still stay in Vietnam, like my friend, I always talk to her, “Oh no, today I have to cung com nguoi nay, cung com nguoi kai lon song [need translation 73:23-73:25]. Always a lot of--almost everyday they have to go to the temple, they cooking--they make their life very difficult. I said, “Take it easy. Why you tie up yourself?” It’s bad. I don’t know how to say. No she cannot do that because a lot of people will yell at her, especially her husband, her husband is overthinking.

HT: So there’s too many expectations when you live in Vietnam?

TT: *(nods)*

HT: Do you have anything else that you’d like to say? About your experiences?

TT: We lucky we live in America. Yes, very lucky. The kid have school. When you retire, you have the retirement. You have medical. When you’re young you just work. I know we have to pay a lot of taxes, that suck, but that’s good too, for your future. Right now, young, you got to pay tax, pay tax and then you getting old, you retire, you get your retirement, you relax. Not that grateful but it’s better than nothing. In another country, you have nothing.

HT: Would you say you’re living the American Dream?

TT: Yeah--a lot of people like to live in America, they have the American Dream. Especially my 3 young sisters. I told them, very difficult in here. And they said that, “Yeah, you live there, always want to say whatever you want.” “Ok,” that means they have a good American Dream. So I try and try to call and contact them to make immigration. But they follow the rule, nothing
you can do. Tell you to wait. And all of a sudden, they say, “Oh, yes, you can come.” And all of a sudden from Vietnam, “I get married!” “I need to add somebody!” That’s your mom (laugh). And then add your father. Ok, so we add the papers. And then, “Oh, you guys can come now!” “Oh, hold on! I’m pregnant; I’m having a baby!” Ok, yes, another year. That’s why; wait and wait. And finally, everybody come. Feel like relax, yes, we finished--we finished our job. (wipes imaginary sweat off her forehead). Take care of you guys, come here, all the sister here and they have their own life, they living--oh, I feel happy. I feel grateful. At least we done whatever we need to be do. Right? Grateful. Very good.

HT: Thank you so much for your time.

--End of Transcript--