FIRST INTERVIEW SESSION

JH: Today is Friday, February 17th, 2012. This is Jimmy Huynh from the Vietnamese American Oral History Project and I will be interviewing Mr. Tri Tran. We are in his office in Krieger Hall in the University of California Irvine, Irvine California. Let’s begin. What is your name?

TCT: My first name is Tri and my last name is Tran. But I would prefer on documents, for example to have my name as Tri and initials C and last name Tran because there are so many Tri Trans out there.

JH: When were you born?

TCT: I was born in 1959.

JH: Where were you born?

TCT: I was born in Saigon, the former capital of South Vietnam.

JH: Could you describe your parents for me?

TCT: Describe…they are normal people. My father is still alive, my mom passed away twenty years ago in Vietnam. My dad has been very hard working. He took care of our family before the Vietnam War and he kept taking care of our family right after that under the communist regime so he was very supportive of our family. My mom took care of the rest of the things around the house and my mom was very sweet lady and she gave us a very good upbringing.

JH: Where did you go up in Vietnam?
TCT: I was born in Saigon but I actually grew up in Nha Trang, a coastal city in the central part of Vietnam.

JH: Could you describe the hometown that you grew up in?

TCT: It has one of the most beautiful beaches in the world. It’s a coastal city, very peaceful and the city is moderate in most every way. Not too big, not too small, not too urbanized, not too rural, the people are very friendly. It has many beautiful landscapes. It’s moderate and peaceful.

JH: What were the main industries in your hometown? Like was it a fishing community? A farming community?

TCT: Oh yeah, since there is a long beach running along the city there is a big fishing community at both ends of the city. One big community in the North toward the north and another one toward the south. The city kind of runs along the beach.

JH: What were your neighbors like?

TCT: My neighbors? You know I lived in Vietnam through two different times. The time before the Vietnam War ended and then another time after. My neighbors before 1975, which is the landmark of our history, they were…OK, not very close to us. We lived in a neighborhood for, for people who served in the army so we were like an army family. We were OK with the neighbors, we were not too friendly with them and they were not very friendly with us either. We were just OK. After the war, I moved to another neighborhood, and we were a little bit more isolated from the neighbors because of the setting of that neighborhood. The houses were a long a street, it wasn’t really like a neighborhood that you would see in America. So those houses were stretched out along the streets. We were just next to each other but not like in an enclosed neighborhood.

JH: How did you and your family in Vietnam celebrate Tết?

TCT: …Most of the Vietnamese people we been always celebrating Tết with a lot of excitement and we had a lot of traditions observed so for us, Tết was very big event and we celebrated it with all of our excitement and everything else.

JH: How did you and your family celebrate birthdays?

We didn’t really celebrate birthdays because it’s not…it wasn’t a tradition for most Vietnamese families. More recently we might’ve had birthday parties celebrated but not in the past.

JH: How did you and your family deal with funerals?

TCT: …It’s part of our culture to…we, we view it as some solemn event in our lives and…in fact my mom died when I was already in the United States, so I was kind of away from that most serious moment in my life. So I was… I don’t have any clear recollection of that because there
were other deaths in the family before her but they were just relatives and I was young then so I don’t remember that much.

**JH:** Are there any other special occasions that you and your family celebrated back in Vietnam?

**TCT:** Other occasions? Not really. You know Vietnam during that time was at war so we were not having a very peaceful life even though in the city where I lived we didn’t really witness the war. Still, we didn’t have all the fun that people in a country with peace could enjoy.

**JH:** In Vietnam, what jobs did you have?

**TCT:** I went to a teacher’s training college so I was supposed to become a teacher. My major was English, so I was supposed to become an English teacher. But right after graduation, I got a job at a city library, and there I worked in foreign language reading room. I worked with books in English, French, Russian, German, because I knew those languages. That was my job until I left the country as a librarian.

**JH:** Did you enjoy this job as a librarian?

**TCT:** I did very much because my passion is language. So I got to work with it and I love reading too. So I got to work with books and not only books but books in those languages that I knew. I enjoyed it a lot. It was a dream job.

**JH:** Could you please describe to me how your schooling was in Vietnam?

**TCT:** I was in 10th grade when the war reached its peak. I had to be evacuated to Saigon to stay away from the effects of the war. Then when the war ended and the communist’s armies entered the rest of the South, I returned to my home town and finished 10th grade. So I continued to finish my high school years under the new regime. And then after that, I went to teacher training college for my degree in English. So that was basically my education in Vietnam.

**JH:** What were your teachers and peers like in school? Like were they strict?

**TCT:** Yeah, I think for the most part teachers in Vietnam are stricter if we compare them to those that we have in the US. They were strict but they were also caring and loving. In fact, I still am in contact with some of them until this day. So the relationship between students and teachers in Vietnam is an important thing and we even respect those other teachers that never talk to us. If they were in the same school, we also looked up to them as if they were our own teachers, let alone they taught us as our teachers, so yes I am still in touch with some of my teachers from long long time ago.

**JH:** What would you say is the biggest difference between how the teacher and student relationship in Vietnam is different than the one in America?

**TCT:** From a student or teacher’s point of view?
JH: From your point of a view, a teacher’s.

TCT: As a teacher, well you know that I was a student and I’m a teacher right now, so I can see that students in Vietnam, like part of what I just said earlier, we look up to our teachers and we keep in touch in them even a long time after we finish their classes. But here but maybe the educational system is very different, you take a class for just a semester or quarter and after that you move on. So as opposed to students in Vietnam taking a class with a teacher for one, two, or three years. So their relationship is much better established. So here, it’s very fleeting. You take a teacher and sometimes you talk about a previous teacher without even remembering what his or her name is. So that’s a big difference that I can see.

JH: What languages do you speak?

TCT: In Vietnam, I spoke Vietnamese. But since I have a very strong passion for languages, I took English and French. You know that in Vietnam, in High School after Junior High, most of us took two languages. For my case, I took English and French. I even took evening classes, weekend classes in English and French and afterwards I began teaching myself Spanish and German and I even went to other classes for Russian so I know those languages because of my passion and also because of the historical situation in Vietnam. You know after 1975 the Russian/Soviet influence in Vietnam was very strong. So a lot of people went to school for Russian, and I was among them because I was curious in the language. And that’s how I got to know Russian as well. I don’t speak, I used to speak Russian a lot better and German too, but since I haven’t used them for a while my knowledge of Russian and German is reduced to a reading knowledge rather than speaking. But, I continued with Spanish so I am still speaking Spanish.

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

TCT: Different generations… you know in the past, Vietnamese people didn’t get to hire educators that much. Only a few privileged families could send their kids to school beyond even junior high. So my grandfather on my dad’s side, I think he only finished elementary school but it was still a big deal back then for someone to finish elementary school. And he worked as a public servant. My grandfather on my mom’s side, he was a teacher, but I think his level of education was just like that of my other grandfather. Most of them finished elementary school and like I said it was already a big deal. My dad, who belonged to a later generation, had more opportunities to go to school. But he only finished high school, which was also a bigger deal at the time, that he could do something more than his father had done. And my mom, my grandmother on both sides, were all housewives because back then, not many women went to school. But my mom did finish elementary school too, she was very smart and with her level of education it was impressive that she knew a lot, that I can recall.

JH: What do you remember the most about your parents and grandparents as a child?
TCT: We, as grandchildren, always had this fear for our grandparents. My paternal grandparents had long passed away so I never got to know them, but we did have our maternal grandparents alive when I was a little boy. And we looked up to them and we were afraid of them, we barely talked to them unless we were talked to. We respected them but we feared them at the same time. I was closer to my parents, but you know it’s not anything that can be compared with a relationship between parents and kids in the US. My dad was always working to take care of us, and he left everything to my mom to take care of, including taking care of little things in the family like teaching us right from wrong, all the details that my dad left for my mother to take care of. So in a way, I was much closer to my mom but nowadays I am close to my dad because he is the only one I have left. So it’s like in the later stage of life, it turns out that it’s a good thing that my dad is very close to me now.

JH: As you were growing up, you said that you feared your grandparents, why did you fear them?

TCT: For us, a grandparent was something serious. Something that we have to look up to, someone that we have to look up to. They were kind of living in their own world and they rarely talked to us, so you know, if you don’t talk to somebody, you don’t feel close to them. So it’s one of the reasons why we never felt close to our parents.

JH: How did your parents meet and marry?

TCT: My mom was…my grandfather had a bookstore. And my mom worked for him, she was like a sales clerk for him, and she was very popular in town because she was beautiful and lots of young men came to the bookstore, not necessarily to buy books, but to see her, and my dad was one of them. So that was how they got to know each other.

JH: In Vietnam, did your family have any sort of annual gathering?

TCT: I think so, you know that in Vietnam we have…yeah, family gatherings would happen when Tet came around, and also our Vietnamese people have that tradition of celebrating death anniversaries so that’s when we got together. When there was a wedding in the family, that’s when we got together as well.

JH: When your family got together at these gatherings, did you tell each other stories and stuff?

TCT: Well, we might have but I was young, so all I did was have fun at those gatherings and I didn’t believe I listened to any stories that were being told during the occasion.

JH: Are you married?

TCT: I am.

JH: And how did you meet your spouse?
TCT: My family and my wife’s family were friends. My wife’s mom organized the trip for us to escape from Vietnam, so we went together on a boat, and then we were rescued by a big ship. We lived together with other refugees in a refugee camp in the Philippines, and we just got closer and closer, and then from being friends we became more intimate friends and when we came to the United States we decided that we should get married.

JH: Do you have any children?

TCT: We do. We a daughter, who’s 17, ready for college, and a son, who’s 7, still yet in second grade, so they are ten years apart.

JH: Do you ever talk to them about your history in Vietnam?

TCT: Yes I do. I think it’s not just about me, but it’s about a country that my kids have never gotten a chance to see, so yes, when there’s a chance I would talk about my life in Vietnam or life in Vietnam in general, and interesting things about the country of their origin.

JH: Does your family have any special sayings or expressions?

TCT: Well, maybe, at this point I can’t think of anything. No, I can’t think of anything right now.

JH: Does your family have any special traditions or customs?

TCT: I don’t think so. We are a normal family; we don’t stand out doing different things.

JH: Does your family keep an altar for your ancestors?

TCT: Yes. Like most other Vietnamese families we do. But there’s already a difference between the altar I have at home compared to the altar that my dad has. So his is more elaborate and mine is more simplified. I can see that the traditions are getting reduced or simplified from generation to generation.

JH: What kind of traditions or celebrations do you maintain for your ancestors?

TCT: For now, since my dad is still alive, he’s still taking care of the death anniversaries and all the traditional rites when Tết comes around. So I am kind of reliant on him to do that. But in the future, when he has gone, then I think I will have to continue those traditions, but of course it won’t be, they won’t be as elaborate as my dad’s doing of them.

JH: Are you and your family religious?

TCT: Religious? We do have religions, I use it in the plural form because my family is Buddhist. But my wife is Catholic. So when we got married, we decided that each of us would keep our own religion. So in my own family, I am the only Buddhist because it was part of the
pact that we had made that our future children be baptized. So I’m Buddhist, but my wife and
two kids are Catholic. But I do go to Church with them, and they go to the Buddhist temple with
me. We are kind of open minded.

JH: Does your family have any special sort of food tradition? Like is there a specific food you
and your family love to eat?

TCT: Not really. We eat pretty much everything else that Vietnamese people would love to eat.

JH: So has there been any kind of recipe that has been passed down from other generations?

TCT: Not really. But my mom used to make a couple of dishes, for example, chicken soup made
with milk, I haven’t seen a lot of other people make that kind of soup, but then she never passed
down any recipes to us, and then she was good at making egg rolls with shrimp, and it’s a special
kind of egg roll and not just egg rolls, but with baked shrimp inside. And I think it was
called…what’s the term… tôm hùa tiể. Anyway, that’s what she made.

JH: Do you have any family heirlooms or mementos?

TCT: Mementos…heirlooms…photos…that’s about it. We don’t keep things. We keep a few
photos of family, and you know, we have lost a lot when the war ended. We had to leave our
house to go to Saigon and then when we came back, our house had been ransacked so we had
lost a lot of things back then. My father left the country, so that’s when we left behind a lot of
other things. So a lot of things have been lost. But we still keep precious photos of our
grandparents that we put on the altar, and we consider them mementos, right?

JH: Could you describe the meaning behind your family name?

TCT: Family name, it’s Tran. I think it’s the second most common Vietnamese last name. In
Vietnam, I think last names do not have a meaning, but first names do, that’s our tradition. This
is the opposite of the names in the US, right? So, a person’s first name means something for
example, my first name Tri means the “brain”, so it means something like that. But Tran is just a
family name, passed down from generation to generation, and you know that some last names,
some Vietnamese last names, have ties with the last names in China too like one time in Taiwan,
the President as a “Tran” too, for example.

JH: How did the war in Vietnam affect your family and community?

TCT: Well the fact that I’m here talking to you today shows that most of Vietnamese people
would be affected by the war one way or another. The immediate thing that you can see is that I
am in the United States because of the war. Had the war not ended the way it ended, then, I
would be still in Vietnam, right? Like I told you earlier, we had to flee to the South when the war
was ending, and that’s when we lost our house and all the belongings inside, and that was the
first time we were affected by the war and I came back to my home city when the war finished. I
went to school but under the new regime, so it was something totally new. We were taught in a different way, my education right after that suddenly changed. We had to learn new things that we had never been taught to like Marxism and Leninism and Communism and the way we interpreted everything at school was suddenly turned around. So in that sense, I was very deeply affected by the consequences after the war.

**JH:** How did you feel about being taught these subjects such as Marxism?

**TCT:** I was still young there, but I could see that it was not the right way to teach students something that they could not have a choice about. I mean everything could be taught, but students should have the right to take a subject or not. In Vietnam, if you want to graduate from the university, one of the required subjects is Marxism/Leninism, so that shows how bad it is for us to have to learn those subjects. So I felt very frustrated about the educational system in Vietnam. And I went on to college and we had to continue our studies in Marxism/Leninism. It was still part of our curriculum.

**JH:** What jobs did you say you had during the war?

**TCT:** Well, during the war I was still a schoolboy, so I never had a job. Here in the United States, high school students could have a job like a part time job, but in Vietnam the tradition is that when you go to school, you go to school, you don’t work. So most of us did not work, of course maybe kids in the poorer families had to work on the side, but I consider our family to be the middle class family, so like most other middle class families in Vietnam back then, we did not work. After the war, I went on to finish high school and went on to college, but I was still not working. Even though my family got a lot worse after the war financially, we still thought it was almost unthinkable for students to work. So that was something like a parent’s responsibility, it’s something cultural that students do not work. But you can see nowadays in Vietnam, it’s almost like in the US; students do work now. But back then, it was something very rare for middle class families at least.

**JH:** Would you want to have worked as a student?

**TCT:** I did not because number 1, we didn’t feel the need to, and number 2, we were thinking it was the “right way” not to work. The thought never crossed our minds that us, that we kids in the family had to work.

**JH:** Were you or your family members involved in the war?

**TCT:** My dad was a captain in the South Vietnam army, so he was involved. But he was…what was the term…he was honorably discharged a few years before the war ended. But those who were still active in the army when the communists came would have to go to what they call the “reeducation camps”, but my dad, having been honorably discharged before, he was exempted. So he didn’t go. Because a lot of people went, and a lot of them died in the camps, and even
when they came back, they died shortly after that. My dad was lucky to not have to go because he was discharged before.

JH: Did you know of anybody who had to go to the reeducation camps?

TCT: Yeah, other members in my extended family, my uncle, my aunt’s husband, a lot of them went.

JH: Did they tell you what it was like to be there?

TCT: I overheard. They didn’t directly tell me, so the things that I know about those reeducation camps I overheard rather than being directly told.

JH: Do you remember what you overheard them saying?

TCT: They had to do very hard manual labor, they were very badly treated, they were starving most of the time, and there were people who were killed on spot because they didn’t obey orders in the prison…horrible things like that.

JH: Did you or any of your family members suffer injuries as a result from the war? Physical injuries?

TCT: No. Not really.

JH: What about mental injuries?

TCT: We could go on and on about that because the biggest impact that we feel right after the war was that we lost our country so to speak. Even though North Vietnam was still Vietnam we thought of it as a different country because it pursued a different ideology very different that from the South, so in a sense my family and me, myself, we thought we had lost the country to the communists. They were Vietnamese as well, but since they had a different ideology, we didn’t even feel like that they were our compatriots. Together with losing the South, we felt like we had lost a lot of other things, like our opportunities to have the right type of education that we would want to have, and my dad had lost his job. Like most of the Vietnamese families in the South back then, we were in financial difficulties and all of that gave us a lot of depression and other negative feelings. So mentally speaking, we were seriously impacted by the post-war consequences.

JH: Where were you during the last days of the war?

TCT: I was in Saigon, south of my home city, about 300 kilometers south of my home city, and we were ready to go to the US because one of my uncles got airplane tickets for all my big family of more than 50 members. We got those official air tickets but the air tickets were post-dated, the communists entered before the dates on the tickets, so we never got a chance to go, and then right after that, one day after the communists entered Saigon, we decided to charter
some bosses to go even more to the south to try and escape by boats, but then after a few days of trying to go to the south, we decided to go back because we couldn’t.

**JH:** Could you describe what was happening around the time of the Fall of Saigon, on 4/30/1975?

**TCT:** The atmosphere was very chaotic. My family was taken to the South on a military airplane, and my dad stayed behind because he had to finish his job there, so when Saigon was invaded, my family, my mom, she was very worried, because my dad was still in Nha Trang which was already in Communist control, and he was able to join us like a month later. I could still remember all the chaotic atmosphere that we felt in Saigon, during the last few days before the Communists came. Everything was confusing, and all of my extended family were living together in one small house of my uncle. So it was very crowded and everybody was worried and there was conflicts between people, too many people living together under the same roof. So many negative things were happening.

**JH:** What was it like to leave your home and country? How did you feel?

**TCT:** It’s a mixed feeling to leave the country, not leaving and coming back, but leaving knowing that I could leave it together. By escaping the country, I knew that I could get to some land where there was freedom, but at the same time, I realized that I was losing a lot and I was leaving a lot behind because when I left my family was still there, I only left by myself, and my sister have been living in the United States then, but I knew that I could be joining her, but at the same time I knew that I was leaving my dad, mom, and siblings behind. So it was a mixed feeling knowing that you would be getting something but knowing that you are losing something too. It’s not a win-win situation.

**JH:** In general, what would you say is the most significant memory you have about this time period, the Vietnam War?

**TCT:** It was unfortunate that I had to witness the war at a very young age. Usually when you are young you should enjoy your youth very innocently, but then I, just like other boys at my age during that time, we had to witness the war and then we couldn’t finish our education in a normal way, we could not enjoy our childhood/youth in a joyful way, so I think it was something very unfortunate for me and for my friends my age. So our recollection of that time was something bitter.

**JH:** What do you think of US policy during the war?

**TCT:** My father used to tell me that when I asked him why the US intervening in the South, he gave me an analogy, he told me to think of a house on fire, and then the neighbors have to try to put out the fire so that the fire wouldn’t go to theirs, so that’s what the Americans were doing in Vietnam. They were trying to stop Communism from coming from the North to the South, or
more generally speaking, they were trying to stop Communism to be spread from Communist China. So that’s why they were involved in the Vietnam War.

**JH:** Why did you come to the United States?

**TCT:** Number 1, to try and get away from the Communist government that I didn’t like. There was no freedom there. No freedom of speech or religion, or any other kind of freedom. Number 2, why the US and not other countries? I was rescued by a ship that could give us Visas to France, Germany, and Belgium. But I chose to stay longer to go to the US for two reasons. My sister had been there, but I knew at the same time that the US would be the best choice because it would give me the best opportunities for my education.

**JH:** How did you arrive at America?

**TCT:** I escaped in a small boat and got rescued by a big ship. That ship was organized by the Doctors without Borders Organization. It was a collaboration between Belgium, Germany, and France, that’s why we were granted those automatic visas as I mentioned earlier. We were on that ship for one month, because it kept going around and around and around to pick up refugees at sea. It took us to Singapore for a few days, but we could not come ashore. We had to still stay on the ship, and we were vaccinated by the local authorities. After that, the ship took all of us to the Philippines where I and other people stayed in a refugee camp called Palawan and I stayed there for 8 months. I got accepted by the US delegation as a political refugee, officially, and that’s when I got transferred to another refugee camp called Bataan. I stayed there for 6 months. That’s where we took classes of language and culture to get ready for our lives in the US.

**JH:** Can you describe the general conditions of the boat you were in?

**TCT:** It was a small boat. It was the size of like 4 classrooms, but there were 96 people on it. The condition was very bad, but we were lucky. A typical sea voyage would take five or six days for people from a Vietnamese coast to another coast somewhere in Southeast Asia, but for us, we only traveled around about 21 hours, and we were still in Vietnamese waters when we were rescued by a big ship. But during that time we were already seeing other boats of Thai pirates, so we were about to be attacked by them, when the big ship appeared, so those Thai pirates, when they saw the big ship, they decided to go away. And then we got rescued by the big ship and later on they just burned our boat once we were already aboard the big ship. And that ship was called “Cap Anamur”. It was organized by a German doctor, and his name was Doctor Neu Deck. He had rescued so many Vietnamese refugees. A lot of them are living in German, and after that he kept rescuing more refugees from other regions of the world from Africa. So he is amazing, he’s like our savior.

**SECOND INTERVIEW SESSION**
JH: When you came to the United States, what possessions did you bring with you?

TCT: Me, myself, and a lot of hopes and just some small pieces of jewelry like rings and necklaces, and that was it. Boat people did not bring much except for themselves because we knew that we would be on a long voyage and I mentioned that we had been almost attacked by the pirates, at that point, some of the women on board of the boat were already trying to swallow some of their jewelry for fear that they would be taken by the pirates. So that’s why I didn’t plan to bring anything with me.

JH: Is there any sort of significance to the jewelry that you bought with you?

TCT: Yeah those little things that ring/necklace were bought for me by my dad and I just brought them with me just like a token of memory, but they were not of great value.

JH: You told me that one of the possessions you “brought” with you were hopes and dreams, could you describe them to me?

TCT: When you live under the communist regime, your opportunities are limited. One of the things that I have dreamed of being able to have when I could get to the United States was to continue with my education. It was the most important thing that you could say, it was my biggest dream to continue my education in the United States. At that time when I left, I had already finished college in Vietnam, but it was a kind of education that I wasn’t satisfied with, so I wished that I could enhance it once I could get to the United States.

JH: What would you say is the thing you remember most about the journey?

TCT: One of the most memorable things was our confronting with the pirates. We could see them from a distance already. We were very scared, but right after that, the big ship came to the rescue and helped us onboard. We stayed onboard of that ship for a month, it was another thing that was very memorable, we shared our daily lives onboard of that ship with other fellow boat people. We shared our experience, it was like living on a cruise ship for a month. And then we were bought to Singapore for a couple of days for vaccinations. We were only staying onboard, looking onto the city of Singapore, but we were not allowed to come ashore. After that, we were bought North to the Philippines. It was very memorable that we started seeing freedom already, we were out of the control of the communist government and we were given the chance to keep hoping for a better life already even though we did know that we would have to stay one or two refugee camps for a while before we could go to a third country like they said. So all of those things I could not forget.

JH: Do you remember why they wouldn’t allow you to Singapore?

TCT: The Singapore government was very strict at the time. They only accepted refugees IF they themselves rescued us at sea, one of their boats or ships rescued us at sea. If other boats/ships rescued other refugees, they would not accept those people.
**JH:** Which family members came along with you during the journey?

**TCT:** I went alone. But I went with a friend of mine, who later became my girlfriend, and now she’s my wife. At that time she wasn’t considered a family member, right?

**JH:** Did you know any friends or family that died during the journey?

**TCT:** I did not. On that ship there severable boats that had been rescued, our boat was lucky, nobody died. We learned right after being rescued that there was a five year old child that had died only 1 or 2 days before because he fell off of the deck and hit his head and he was in critical condition. The ship decided to bring him back to Singapore or any close-by ports for him to get medical help. But then on the way, the kid just died, so they decided to dump his body into the ocean, and decided to go back to the high seas, where they saw us. So in a way, the tragic death of that kid had saved us, because had he prolonged his life for a couple of more hours, the ship would’ve continued to go toward Singapore, then it would’ve missed us, and then we would have been attacked by the pirates. So it’s a bittersweet experience that somebody’s death can save a lot of lives.

**JH:** When you and your then-girlfriend arrived at America, were you in a refugee camp?

**TCT:** Not in the US. We were two refugee camps in the Philippines, Palawan in the island of Puerto Princessa in the Philippines, and we stayed there for 8 months and then we got interviewed by the US team and we got approved having the status of refugees. When we got approved, we were then transferred to another camp called Bataan near the capital of Manila, where we stayed for another six months. We learned more English and American culture to get ready for our resettlement in the United States. When we came to the US, we went directly to our families.

**JH:** When you were at the refugee camps, could you describe your experience there?

**TCT:** Compared to the other refugee camps in Southeast Asia, in other countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Singapore, I think the refugee camps, the first one that I stayed in, was only second to those in Singapore. Singapore had the best living conditions for refugees. The ones in the Philippines was only second to them. I had learned that in the other refugee camps in other countries were very bad, the living conditions there were miserable and refugees were not allowed to go out of the camps, but we in the Philippines we were allowed to go out of the camp if we wanted to. So we had a certain degree of freedom, and the organization inside the camp was very good. There were Buddhist temple in the camp, there was a Catholic church in the camp, there was even a canteen/small restaurant in the camp. All the daily activities there were very well organized, it was just like a miniature society.

**JH:** How did you get to come to the United States, like for example, did family sponsor you to come here?
**TCT:** That’s one of the ways people did at that time to get people out of refugee camps. I had to prove that my family had background that was not in favor with respect to the communist government. My father had been in the army in the south, and for that, I did not have a lot of opportunities to go to school or to work, so they based themselves on those facts to recognize my status of being a refugee. And then, in addition to that, if I wanted to go to the US, the faster way was to prove to them that I had a family member already living in the US, and that would make my resettlement better. For other people who could prove their refugee status but didn’t have anybody in the United States, it would take longer for them to go.

**JH:** When you first arrived to the United States, what were your first impressions of the country?

**TCT:** I was totally overwhelmed. When you go to another country, especially when that country has a different social/political system, everything is overwhelming. I can only say that my impression was feeling overwhelmed because for the first few days I could not even see things even though they were right in front of me.

**JH:** Where did you first settle in America?

**TCT:** I first lived in Los Angeles with my sister.

**JH:** Why did you live there with your sister, was it because she came here first?

**TCT:** Yes, she had come here first, and she had sponsored me. It just makes sense that I stay with her for when I first came. I couldn’t find any other place to live.

**JH:** How long did you stay with your sister in Los Angeles?

**TCT:** I think we stayed there for a year and she found a better job in Orange County. At that time I was already working at Bank of America as a bank teller, and when my sister found a better job in Orange County, we always liked Orange County better because we thought life in Orange County was more relaxing and traffic was better, the streets were bigger, so we always wanted to go to Orange County. That’s why she tried to find a job there. I asked for a transfer from Bank of America from Los Angeles to Bank of America in Garden Grove. Actually the Bank of America I worked with was in Beverley Hills, not exactly in Los Angeles. The transfer was smooth, I asked for it and I got it, so I went down to Bank of America in Garden Grove to work.

**JH:** You mentioned that you were working as a bank teller after resettlement, but was this the only job you had to make a living?

**TCT:** As a refugee I was sent to a social agency to get some kind of job training and there was a social worker in that agency whose husband was the vice president, sorry, he WAS the President of the Bank of America branch at Beverly Hills. So she would refer a lot of us to go work for him at that branch of Bank of America, so I went through a very brief training for a week before
I actually became a bank teller. So, the reason why I was able to work at Bank of America that easily was her reference and the President/Manager of the Branch was her husband, so it was easy that way.

**JH:** But, did you have any other jobs before becoming a professor that you are right now?

**TCT:** Between being the bank teller and my teaching job now, I did only a few other things. After working with Bank of America, I changed my job to yet another bank, a small private bank but they gave me more time and I became full time instead of part time. I worked there at the Citizen’s Bank at Costa Mesa for only a year or a little bit more, and then I became a state worker working for an insurance company and it belonged to the state. I vaguely remember that the name of the insurance company as “Worker’s Compensation Insurance Company” something like that, and then I worked there only for a year or so, and at the same time I was also going to Orange Coast College, so I had always been going to school in addition to working. When I finished my 2 years at Orange Coast College with an AA Degree, I got transferred to the University of California, Irvine, and that was when I had to go to school full-time, here we are not allowed to go to school part-time. So that’s why I had to stop working at that insurance company and instead I reapplied to Bank of America to work at night as a proof operator. Instead of being a bank teller, I worked at night, processing the customer’s checks using a big proof machine. I read those checks through that machine and the checks got encoded. That’s what I did for 4-5 years while I was going to UC Irvine. And then I finished my BA in Spanish at UC Irvine, and I applied and got accepted at UCLA for my Masters and PHD programs. So during that time, I commuted between Orange County and Los Angeles, for 5 years.

**JH:** Did you experience any sort racism at school at UCI/UCLA?

**TCT:** Not very obviously. But I always had a feeling that...well...I think racism happens everywhere. At any time. We as human beings when we look at other people that are of different race, we usually have a prejudice. I just take it as something normal, but I didn’t really have any very very bad experiences with racism or never witnessed anything like that. I just take it as part of life.

**JH:** Were there any Vietnamese-American groups at UCI/UCLA then?

**TCT:** There were. But I was too busy to get involved with those organizations, I was always going to school and working at the same time. And I also got married in the middle of my studies at UCI too. I wasn’t that young anymore so I thought I would have to do things simultaneously I could not do one thing and finish it and move on to the next one. At my age back then I was already in my 30s so I thought I would take care of multiple things. So I was working, going to school, getting married, was having our first daughter, all during that time.

**JH:** What were some similarities and differences between your old community in Vietnam and the new one here in America?
TCT: That’s kind of hard to compare. In Vietnam, we don’t have a sense of community. I lived in a small city, that small city was my “big” community. Everybody was living quite normally in their own cities and country. So I didn’t really have a sense of community back then because I took everything for granted. But here in the United States, I did feel a sense of community because the Vietnamese people group themselves in certain areas. The sense of community is stronger for me when I live here. I can sense that, and that gives me some sense of being more cooperative and feeling kind of united with the people in my community in Orange County.

JH: How do you identify yourself in American society? Like for example, do you be preferred to be called Asian American? Vietnamese American?

TCT: I usually identify myself as Vietnamese American. Asian is a vaguer term. To the Caucasian family, I could be labeled as Asian American, but I see myself as Vietnamese American, and sometimes I simply consider myself Vietnamese still because my time spent in Vietnam is still longer than my time spent in the US so far.

JH: You mentioned earlier that your first impressions of America was that it completely overwhelmed you. Do you have any funny or memorable experiences of culture shock?

TCT: Not so much as something that I would call culture shock, but if we consider language as part of culture, then I did have some funny things of “linguistic shocks”. For example, that happened when I was working at Citizen’s Bank. There was this Mexican guy called Jose, and he was a co-worker. There was this supervisor, who was also Mexican. During our conversations, she said something in a joking way “No way, Jose.” And at first, I thought she mistook me for that other worker named Jose, but I didn’t say anything the first time she said it. Then the next time I said something, and then she laughed and she said “No way, Jose.” So for that second time, I said “I’m sorry, my name is not Jose.” And then she laughed and she explained to me that it was just an expression. If we consider that as “culture shock”, then yes it is, because language is part of culture. So I learned little things like that being exposed to new words, new expressions, and I think it was kind of funny. I usually tell this story to my students.

JH: Could you describe to me the naturalization process that you went through? Becoming a citizen of the US…

TCT: It wasn’t really a process. There are steps/requirements, first you had to have live here for a certain amount of time, and then you would take a citizenship test, and if you passed it, then you become a citizen. I, like other people, went to a social service agency to take classes regarding the test. I was lucky in the sense that they also wanted me to be a teaching assistant in one of those classes and I became later on a teacher teaching citizenship test. So when I took the test myself, having been a student in those classes and later on an assistant and later on a teacher, it helped me a lot. It made it easier for me to pass the test. So I think the process was quite simple
for me, by fulfilling the time requirement and the test requirement and I became a citizen back then.

**JH:** Do you still keep in touch with family or relatives from Vietnam?

**TCT:** I only have distant relatives in Vietnam, and I do have some close friends in Vietnam, with whom I still have contact. Before I wrote letters/cards to them, but now living in the electronic era, I send them emails. That’s what most people would do. But I’m still in contact with them, not so much with my distant relatives, but more with my friends.

**JH:** Have you gone back to visit Vietnam?

**TCT:** I have not. The reason is I escaped the country as a political refugee, and I just don’t think it would make sense for me to come back. It doesn’t really make sense for me to leave the country illegally, and now come back to it legally. It just doesn’t make any sense to me. I would love to go back to my country to pay respects to my mother, who was buried there in my home city, to see my old friends again, but definitely not with the political situation in Vietnam for the time being.

**JH:** So if it were possible for Vietnam to not be a communist nation anymore, be a country with more freedom/democracy, then would you come back to Vietnam?

**TCT:** I would in a split of a second. For me, communism is not what people should fight against anymore. Anything that is associated with dictatorship should be fought against. If a communist party can participate in a free election just like other political parties then I think that the communist party is very progressive, very realistic and fair. The only thing that bugs me is that the communist party in Vietnam is monopolizing the political stage in Vietnam. If they were running for elections together with other political parties in Vietnam then it would be a different story. So I’m not necessarily against the communists, I’m against any regime or government that is a dictatorship. You can see that in some countries where there is no communism, but still the government is a dictatorship. In that sense, that’s what we have to stand up against. We are for a democratic society, that’s all I would like to see in Vietnam.

**JH:** In your day to day life, is there anything that particularly reminds you of Vietnam?

**TCT:** Most of the time. I live in Westminster, the heart of Little Saigon, how could I forget the Vietnamese atmosphere in the first place? Everything I see, I see something Vietnamese, the Vietnamese people, the Vietnamese shops and restaurants, and the Vietnamese signs...yes, I feel very lucky of being able to live in a community like that. So it’s like I have access to everything I like. I can decide to go to a Vietnamese restaurant one night, but I could also go to an American/Thai/Korean/Japanese restaurant whatnot. I feel very very lucky living in a place where I can have access to anything, everything internationally.


**JH:** Are there any traditions and customs that you’ve made an effort to preserve in America?

**TCT:** In our family we still have anniversaries for the deceased, one of our traditions. We still observe the Lunar New Year, and other things like the Mid-Autumn Festival for kids. For me I would tell stories about that festival for kids to my children so that they can understand a little more our culture. We eat moon cakes, as part of our tradition of celebrating the festival. And we do things like that.

**JH:** Are there any traditions that you’ve given up since you moved to America?

**TCT:** Some of them. Since my father is still alive, he takes care of the more important traditions, like worshipping the ancestors and having those offerings to our ancestors during Tet or the night before. I kind of let him do that, but maybe in the future, I will have to take care of those traditions that now are being taken care of by my father. So in that sense, I haven’t given those traditions up. I just let my father, who belongs to the previous generation, to take care of, and when my turn comes, I think I will do that just like a way to show my children that we still want to have some kind of traditions in our family.

**JH:** From your perspective, how has the Vietnamese community changed since the past?

**TCT:** I think change is inevitable in anything and especially for a community there is no way a community does not change over time. Change for the better, change for the worse, whichever, there must be some change in the community. But I can see that in the Vietnamese community, we are more aware of things that are going on in this country like in politics, in other aspects of life, and we have had a lot of successful people in a lot of aspects in the US. We have so many people who are successful in education, politics, in the medical fields, I can’t begin to think of all those fields where we can see successful Vietnamese people. So in that sense, I think our community has grown up and can be walking hand-in-hand with the other communities like those of the Latino and the Chinese and what not.

**JH:** Are you involved with the Vietnamese community here in the US? If so then how?

**TCT:** I am. During my free time I am involved in an organization called the Association of the Vietnamese Language and Culture Schools in Southern California. I am currently a member of the board of that organization, and I served a two-year term as the president of that association just this past year. My role in that organization is to organize the summer institute in which we train volunteers Vietnamese language teachers, and I also participate in, as an editing staff member for a series of Vietnamese language textbooks that are published by the same organization. So I am pretty active, even though my free time is kind of limited, I think I should do something for the community by becoming the member of that association.

**JH:** What do you think of Little Saigon?
TCT: I’m very proud of it, because we have Little Tokyo, Little Italy, Little Havana in the United States so I’m very proud that our community has that. I feel so touched to see the sign that says “Welcome to Little Saigon” on the Freeway, the 22 Freeway. Not every community can have its own little town like that, like the Filipinos have been here for a long time, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen a Little Manila or something like that even though we do see Koreatown, we do see some of the other little towns that I have mentioned, but not every community can have a little town like Little Saigon. Little, but it has a very big significance.

JH: What are the most important things that you think future generation of Vietnamese Americans should remember about the past?

TCT: One of the most important things that I think the future generation of our kids would have to do or maintain is first of all, is to maintain the Vietnamese language, because I think as a language teacher myself, I think language is the key to everything, especially the key to the culture. So that’s one of my biggest concerns that the Vietnamese kids here are losing their language. Not that they cannot speak the language, they can, but they only use Vietnamese for their parents/grandparents, so my concern is when our older generation die out, they wouldn’t be using Vietnamese with their peers. That’s one of my missions, being a member of the association that I mentioned earlier, that we would have to do things to try to make the kids use Vietnamese with everybody, not just with parents and grandparents. The problem here is not a linguistic problem, there are kids that are fluent in Vietnamese, but they just don’t speak it, because they don’t comfortable, natural speaking Vietnamese. So that is actually a psychological problem, not a linguistic problem. Of course we don’t discuss cases where a kid cannot speak Vietnamese, if he cannot speak Vietnamese, of course he does not speak it. But this is the case with kids who are competent in Vietnamese that do not want to use it for communication, and for me, it’s a psychological issue more than linguistic.

JH: Ultimately, how do you feel about your decision to come to the United States?

TCT: First and foremost, I wanted to get out of the country because I did not want to live under the communist regime. Second of all, leaving that regime, I also wished to go to the land of opportunity, which is the USA. So it’s like I got both of my wishes, leaving where I didn’t like to live, coming to where I would love to come.

JH: Finally, is there any really significant memory or stories that you would like to share?

TCT: I’m running out of time, so could we do this with an e-mail? Let me think about it because we want to make it special, right?