Narrator: NGUYEN, CAO HIEP

Inter viewer: Shaun Gutierrez

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SG: Alright, Let’s get started. So please tell me your name, your date of birth and where you were born

NCH: My name is Hiep Nguyen. Full name is Nguyen Cao Hiep. I was born in Vietnam in 1967.

SG: So where did you grow up? What city in particular?

NCH: I was grow up in Vietnam in Saigon. Now it is called Ho Chi Minh City.

SG: So tell me about your childhood. Did you have any siblings? What where your memories when you were growing up.

NCH: My family has six siblings, I have a twin brother. Three other brothers and two sisters and also another step sister. So it’s a total of seven. And we grow up the family is very crowded. We grew up with my uncles and aunts. The whole family living in one house and my whole family in one room. So it always feel crowded and a lot of interaction. The first thing that come to my mind is the house is always filled with music. My aunt is a professional musician and my uncles as well. And we have a café with live music. So every night we would hear music, song and it is also filled with art. My uncle is also a wonderful, I wouldn’t say he’s an artist. He just self-taught. But he always like draw something. He told stories and he draw. And that how I learned and get know about arts and drawing and painting.
SG: Just to go back, among your siblings, how is the dynamic? Are you the youngest? Are you in the middle?

NCH: I have a twin. So we’re both the eldest. Actually, he’s older than me. 15 minutes. Two more brothers. And two sisters. 4 boys and 2 girls, it’s the perfect its best.

SG: So boys and 2 girls, okay.

NCH: Dynamics, of course I am very close with my brother. Because we like grew up fighting, playing and we always in contact so and then love. Fun things. And also a lot of dramatic fighting between brothers.

SG: You said that you aunts and uncles, and your uncle is self-taught. Would you say that art is something important to your family?

NCH: Yes, in my mother’s side. That’s where we would grow up. My mom is, used to be a piano teacher even though she is a pharmacist. She taught piano on the side. And then I grow up learning violin and I still remember my dad took me on the bicycle for a long, long trip to get to the teacher to take a lesson. And then sometime the trip was so long, he bike and rode a bike, you know those bike where you have to side on the tube. And the feet would get numb and I would lose my shoe. Just to say that we, my parents were dedicated and wanted us to learn music. Even though art isn’t something you want to pursue as a profession. Growing up my dad would say, “Hiep, would you get a job yet?”

SG: Alright, moving on. Did you remember any tradition when you were a kid? In terms of culture, dancing, music. You know, something that’s more native, as opposed to something more French or American influenced.

NCH: My mom and my aunts, they play classical music, so you know, like all those classical, Beethoven, Chopin. I grew up with that kind of music and Also the Vietnamese Anti war music.
When I grew up during the peak of the Vietnam war. As I remember, I was about 4 or 5 years old. That was in 1972. That’s the height of the way. A lot of sad songs, about war and killing and especially a famous musician. He’s passed away now, but everybody every Vietnamese knows his name. His name is Trinh Cong Son. He wrote those beautiful sad songs about war, and anti war. Music…Like my aunt also sing so all those beautiful songs I still remember. Every night in the café, one of the first live music café in Saigon. It was very popular. I still remember listening to the music, serving and cleaning table for customers.

SG: So, I’d like to know more about your schooling in Vietnam. What the education was like, and how far in school did you get before coming to the United States.

NCH: I graduated high school and I took the Examination to the University. The art institute of Saigon, even though I got the 2nd highest points on the examination. I was denied, the access to the University because at that time my dad was in the US, and also he was in the south army. So, with you know, the political background, and the government and school system found out about it. So I couldn’t attend the University. SO during that time, I make a decision to travel around the country. I mean it’s a long story, so that I how I developed my drawing and painting through traveling city after city and town and village. I learned to draw landscape and people. At that time I took a trip, about two and a half years. I walked all the way to the border of Vietnam and China. It is about 16,000 kilometers. So it took me two and a half years. I mean to look back, that was most productive and wonderful experience learning about the country, the people and culture of Vietnam. I imagine if I was at university, I would probably not gain that knowledge and access to real life. I mean it took me a long time to heal from the traumatize from the transition from high school and couldn’t get to college having nothing to do. Feeling lost. And Also feel bitter and anger about the system and the people, actually the teacher, I feel like he
betrayed by telling the school of my background. He was the only one who knew about. For a long time I hate school. I hate teachers. So it took many years to heal, and come back. Especially to be a teacher myself

SG: So lets talk about your family. Growing up what do you remember most about your parents?
NCH: My parents…My mom, we were close. Cause she was always home. My dad was in the army so he often left town for a long period of time to the front[lines]. My mom, I remember her hobbies was playing mahjong. Even now we play mahjong because we learned from her. Growing up I remember my dad is always in his army jeep, he drove very fast and we couldn’t breathe sitting inside. Usually in the weekend we sometimes went to visit my grandmother, on my father’s side. Somehow, I got scared to go to visit my grandma by my dad side, because every time we go there we had to go to church. My dad is very popular. He is such a very outgoing, he had a lot of friends and then he is a captain he came home always with his gang. And always partied. Maybe I’ll stop there.

SG: Aside from English, what other languages do you speak.
NCH: I Speak Vietnamese, and I speak Gibberish. (Chuckling ensues)

SG: In what context do you feel the need to speak Vietnamese, or when do you choose to speak Vietnamese.

NCH: When I’m with another Vietnamese, and of course when I’m with my family. Or when I went back to Vietnam, or when I don’t want other people to understand me.

SG: So do you know how your parents met?

NCH: The story was my mom was my dad’s student. So he was tutoring my mom and that’s how they met and in the beginning. That’s another long story.

SG: It’s alright we have time.
NCH: Of course, he considered he was quite handsome. He’s poor but he’s really someone love knowledge and learning. So when he became my mom’s teacher, so you know that’s how it happened.

SG: So lets move on then?

NCH: Yes

SG: Okay, So you have a wife?

NCH: Yes

SG: So did the how both of you met?

NCH: So when I first came to the US, I stayed in Northridge and my brother was in CSUN, calstate Northridge, he was the president of the Vietnamese Association and he would have the meetings at home in the garage, and my wife was one of the members. So that’s how we met.

SG: Lets talk about your traditions and culture. Does your family have any special sayings or expressions?

NCH: I would say from my mom. My mom would always tell us story about my grandparents. That my grandparents always say just…It doesn’t come to my mind, Maybe we can come back.

SG: Does your family keep an altar?

NCH: Yes absolutely. In our home, there is an always an altar for our ancestors. My mom always had prayers and incense every morning. Of course, we need to pay respect during anniversaries for those who pass away every year. Have a celebration. Every New Year, we would have a big banquet.

SG: what religion does you family practice?

NCH: growing up my mom’s side is Buddhist and my father’s side is catholic. So we grew up both: church and temple. I studied the bible with my French teacher. I also heard my
grandmother, praying and chanting the Buddhist mantra.

SG: And for you personally, which do you follow?

NCH: I still go to both.

SG: Still?

NCH: Nowadays, I’m not really going every week. Every time I travel, I seek a temple or a church. I would go there and spend an hour to meditate and contemplate. To feel at home at a strange place. Other than that I don’t go to church weekly anymore.

SG: I’d like to discuss the war time experiences, before and after the war. How did the war affect your family and community directly?

NCH: After the war my dad was in the concentration camp for three years. During that time, my mom had to take care of the family. She went out to do the work, and at the same time took care of my dad in the prison. I mean it was a very difficult time because the whole system collapsed. We don’t have enough food to eat. I still remember every day we had to stand a long line to get a piece of bread. I remember the government took over our house, and I remember we had to go back to our grandparents. Then, when my dad came back from the prison, he tried to escape. He made it to America but at the same time he leave behind the whole family. I took us about 13 years for us to reunite with him in America. In terms of the war, as I said earlier, my dad often went to the front so we don’t see him as often. And right after the war he was in the prison, and the he went to the US. So for a very long time I didn’t see my dad. So you could say I didn’t have a role model. But the image is always, When he was with us, he teached us how to exercise. Get healthy and physical. I still remember, every morning we, he would wake us up at 5’oclock in the morning and run around in the block. The image was like a duck with those little ducklings running around the block. Sometimes, when I exercise, I remember him.
SG: You mentioned that you were separated for 13 years, so within those 13 years how did you maintain connection with your father?

NCH: It seems like its very far, and we tried to escape by boat. But we failed and once in a while we receive a letter. And once in a while we receive a package of toys from our dad from the US. Every year, we felt that this is the year we would see our dad, and a year went by and another year went by. In the end, I kinda give up and thinking that I might not see him again. But finally the papers went through and so we able to go see him again in the US. But it was a very very long period.

SG: where did you live during the war?

NCH: Before the ’75, we lived in Saigon. My dad was a captain so we had a house by the, near the camp. SG: IF you could remember the time before and after the war, how did the community around you change?

NCH: Before the war, I mean. How do I put it, before the war, it seemed like we lived in a more prosperous. My grandparents were a middle upper class. So we were quite a bit wealth. After the war we lost everything we lost the house, the surrounding people had the same situation. Also there were a lot of new comer into town. Of course some part we always feel bitter about losing our house and unable to go to school.

SG: During the war, did you work in anyplace?

NCH: During the war, I was in 3rd or 4th

SG: So no Job? (Laughter) During the war, what did you remember the most?

NCH: During the war, I mean one of the image about the war is that one day there a huge noise. There’s aircraft flying over our house, and smoke coming from the horizon and a loud noise. Huge bullets penetrated the roof and my grandpa came up to pick up the bullet and burned his
hand because it was still. My grandma was praying a few feet from it. The bullet could have killed here. So that the image for war for me.

SG: In any time during the war has any family member been capture by the communists?

NCH: No

SG: towards the end of the war, where were you during that end of the war?

NCH: I was still in school, and the story of the bullet was on the last day of the war.

SG: How was life like after the war for you?

NCH: Everything changed, and my dad disappeared. Sometimes, I travelled with my mom to visit my dad in the prison. It was a very long trip through the woods. Since we were still young we were still young and innocent and played war.

SG: So how did your family try to rebuild itself?

NCH: I mean my dad escaped from Vietnam, and after that our basic goal is to escape and find him. So we spent a lot of time and all our money to go on trips. So we lost all our money. So at the time we went on such a trip so I couldn’t go back to school. There was a period I didn’t go to school. finally When we decided that we weren’t able to go on these trips, that when I was able to go back to school.

SG: Let talk about your immigration, so you had said after 13 years had passed the papers went through and you were able to reunite with your dad?

NCH: I left by plane. We seek better life, and we didn’t know what Americans look like. My twin brother also escape with my aunts, on a separate trip and made it to the US in the 80s. So I now receive a picture of him. So America looks so beautiful.

SG: When you were coming to the United States, what did you bring with you?

NCH: Almost nothing, All my artworks, drawing, paintings all lost. Some part, some how I just
learned to move. We’ve moved and lost so much, we developed a mentality that no thing is important. Yeah, we came here with almost nothing.

SG: So what the journey like for you? And if you can remember can you describe the conditions?

NCH: Beside the boat trip. We finally got on an airplane and we flew to Thailand, spent a week there and flew to the Los Angeles Airport and that was easy.

SG: in Thailand where did you stay at?

NCH: I don’t remember but it was a building with thousands of refugee. All I can remember it was crowded. Every day all we ate was eggs and some soup and some rice. That all we had, eggs everyday.

SG: On your trip to America which family members came with you?

NCH: My mom, and my five siblings?

SG: Can you describe the building to me?

NCH: It was very crowded, all the kids were half naked, it was very hot and humid. We all lying on the floor and its like a commune living. It was only for a week. It was kinda fun. So it nothing dramatic about it?

SG: so coming to the United States, was your family sponsored?

NCH: it was through refugee status through my dad.

SG: So when you first came to the United States, what was your first impression?

NCH: The first- when we drove out, in Los Angeles Airport, everything is just so bright. You know, it’s almost like it almost blind my eyes. When, oh wow, the street is so big! And the car drives so fast. And the first thing is the smell.

SG: The smell?
NCH: The smell is just so delicious.

SG: Can you describe that more?

NCH: Like those beautiful package when you first open, and then that’s delicious and sweet, and gentle. I sure remember when we first came to our house, and we opened the door and walk in, and the smell is like I never smelled before. It’s just so…wonderful.

SG: In that first home of yours, is that where you continued to grow up, or did you move again?

NCH: Oh, we moved several times since. SO that house, we live for a couple years. And then it was burned down. And then that’s when everybody spread out and go their own way. So I moved to Seattle, and then New York, and then my brother and sister were move.

SG: Can you now tell me about your education here in the United States?

NCH: I learn English through watching movie. I remember when I first came to the U.S., every day I walk to the $1 movie theatre and in the morning at 10 o’clock, and then walk out at 10 o’clock in the evening. So, I spend 10 hours watching movie and then walk home and stop by McDonalds get French fries or something. And I did that for a couple months. And then of course, I go to community college and study ESL, so I stay at Pierce college for a couple years. And then, until the house burn down, that when I start travel to other and seek new jobs.

SG: After Pierce college, did you go on to higher education?

NCH: No. I start working in art jobs and as employee, and working in the nail salon. And move all the way to New York and Buffalo and at that time, I feel like, “man, I didn’t expect U.S. like this.” I have to work so hard, 6 and 7 days a week, because the isolation. This is not Vietnam. This is not friends around. And also, at that time, I want to do art, but couldn’t afford to do art. It was hard time.

SG: Aside from financial issues, what other challenges have you experienced, starting over here?
NCH: Of course the language. Language is the biggest battle. Even now, after twenty-some years, I still feel like English is my second language. And it will be forever. But always learning English- what was the question again? (chuckles)

SG: The challenges that you faced?

NCH: Also the sense of isolation. Especially as an artist, I work in the studio and don’t see a lot of people. And of course for the first couple years, couldn’t communicate. I still remember struggle to write application for college. So somehow have delay my decision to go back to school. So after working for ten years and then I went back to school to get my B.A. and then get my Master. So it took me about n years to fifteen years to complete my education.

SG: What school did you go to get your BA, and what other school did you go to to get your Masters?

NCH: I get my BA at Cal State Long Beach, and also my Master at Cal State Long Beach. And I also get my teaching credential there. So I spend six years in Cal State Long Beach (laughs).

SG: Wow.

NCH: Too long (laughs).

SG: In your entire time in the United States, have you ever encountered racism?

NCH: (long pause) I mean, not directly.

SG: In what way did you experience this indirect form?

NCH: When I remember I attend this retreat, and surround me is all white. I feel like I am the only Asian there. And then there’s some kind of exercise- I don’t remember exactly- but I remember, I was, like, explode. And then I slammed the table, and then I screamed. And I think that the lady was saying something about where you come from, why you doing here, that kind of stuff. It’s more like my fear of being with other white, so I wouldn’t put it as racism toward
me. But maybe toward them.

SG: In American society, how do you identify yourself? Do you call yourself Asian, Asian American? Are you first and foremost a Vietnamese, or Vietnamese American?

NCH: I would say Vietnamese American.

SG: Do you have any funny or memorable experiences in the United States?

NCH: Hmm. Talking about the issue of race, I always afraid of white man… scared. One time, I went to this retreat and then we went to the sweat lodge. And then, we all naked. And it was very dark and hot in there. And then when we come out from the sweat lodge, and I see them- oh man, they naked, they miserable (playful voice). They just need help and need love (laughs). And then I naked with friend, white guys, and we are very good friends for a long time since. So just realize that they just suffer and need love like anyone else.

SG: I assume you’re an American citizen now?

NCH: Yes.

SG: That means you’re naturalized, and there was paperwork that needed to be done. How was the process for that like?

NCH: It was not difficult. I remember after five years, and then we took a season test. And that’s it.

SG: Do you partake in the U.S. elections? Whether it be for governor, or for president, or a local community?

NCH: I only vote once.

SG: Only once.

NCH: The last one was Obama. But before that, I never vote.

SG: So you voted for Obama?
NCH: Mm. (affirms)

SG: Why did you feel like you needed to start voting? Or for that instant, why did you feel the need to vote for President Obama?

NCH: Just because my wife… (Chuckles) Wants to vote for him- and she kind of push me (laughs). “You go vote!”

SG: Do you still keep in touch with family or relatives in Vietnam?

NCH: Yes.

SG: With whom, and how do you do so?

NCH: For the last five years- every year, I went back there. And go back there for a month. Usually for the project. During these years, I still keep in touch with some of my artist friends.

SG: Do you remember the first time you went back home to Vietnam? How was that like for you?

NCH: I was strange. I feel like I not belong there anymore. I feel different. And I still remember that I went to this place, it’s called Dalat. And I feel like, “Oh, how come I didn’t feel like fit in, belong there.” And one day that I observe the motorcycle- and they wear those plastic sweater, so I went to the supermarket and buy exactly the same one like those motorcycle- how do you say it? Motorbike- it’s like taxi, but one motorcycle. Anyway, just remember that the sense of now I don’t feel like I identify in America, and now, not in Vietnam- so where I am?

SG: Today, now that you’ve been in the United States longer, how do you deal with the dynamic that you don’t feel like you belong in Vietnam, and here in America- as you’re still trying to find your way- How do you deal with that?

NCH: The only way is to be something bigger. Something translation. So not necessary Vietnamese or American, but in the sense my art. It give me a channel to go beyond such a
narrow identity so now that I am able to travel and be with anywhere that I want and my art go beyond the beyond it gave me a sense of..

SG: Alrighty, are there any traditions that you man an effort to preserve.

NCH: You mean traditions as a culture?

SG: Yes.

NCH: Tet, Like the new year, we have a family reunion.

SG: Who usually goes to the family reunion?

NCH: my siblings and my aunts and uncles from Australia usually come and that’s when everyone comes home.

SG: In your opinion what will become of the Vietnamese culture in the United States?

NCH: the first thing is that the community, the little Saigon, there should be an art organization to preserve the art and the exchange of the artist who grow up here and go back to Vietnam to learn new things and have experience in the Vietnam and produce work here and vice versa. So I think the exchange between the Vietnamese in Vietnam and the Vietnamese here bring out the culture.

SG: are you involved in the Vietnamese community here in the United States? If so in what ways do you put yourself out there?

NCH: I Remember when I was in New York, in Buffalo and when I decided to go back to art. The first thing I came back to Orange County and did some exhibition. Do some work with VAALA and start teaching several art classes for the Vietnamese community.

SG: Do you visit little Saigon?

NCH: Yes.

SG: for what purposes do you go?
NCH: of course, the food. My family lives here and so it's very close. But usually I would stay here for a couple of months and because of my work I travel a lot. It feels like there's a home outside of Vietnam.

SG: What do you think are the most important things that Vietnamese Americans should remember about their past?

NCH: I believe it's natural, a natural course for a Vietnamese, even the one born here, to seek their background and the culture, what makes them look different. So a lot of young college try to go back to Vietnam and do their work and learn about the Vietnamese and Vietnam and their culture. That's why talking about the travelling exchange program to help them learn about the past. I think it's a natural course.

SG: So why did you choose your art as a way to express yourself?

NCH: Since I don't speak English very well, so it just in the beginning it was a survival skill. Able to draw something when I can't say it. When we talk I use my hands a lot when I can't describe the word. I also think it's a special skill that enable me to share ideas and not depend so much on words and language?

SG: What message do you want to send with your art?

NCH: Different periods have different set of needs and concern and expression. You mean for a long time I worked at the studio. It help with the sense of isolation. Then I started working with the community art projects and gave me another channel to connect with other people that I would normally not see and have the opportunity to learn and be a connect with.

SG: And so I understand you started the circle painting project, when did that first start?

NCH: When I first when back to Vietnam, after the first 9-10 years living in the US. So when I went back there, in a way of searching for, search my way back to art. Because for first 10 years
of trying to earn a living, learn the language and trying to assimilate. I come to the point maybe the way to go back to art is to go back to where I first start. That’s where I started doing the circle. During that time I didn’t say it was the circle painting, but it is a process of meditation and painting the circle. A way of breathing and being mindful. And for a long period of time I paint landscape, people, abstract. I do installation. So I find something to do that is simple that everybody can understand and I don’t have to explain. So In the beginning I draw a circle just feel right. I don’t need to make something more complicate than that. SO one day I invited the children to my studio.

SG: can you tell me more about your circle painting and your inspiration?

NCH: At that time I begin to learn about meditation. Everything you do you have to be mindful and breathe. Every movement. The only, the most easy way to control the action is by breathe in and breathe out and make a circle. So that’s easier to practice that. I also in the bigger sense I feel that it took me a long time to come to the US and now I return to Vietnam and now I made another circle a big circle. I remember the trip when I walked from Saigon to Hanoi. And somehow it is all connected, a sense of interconnection and interrelated. So now I do this circle painting. It feel like an extension of little river of conscious and now come together in a bigger realm.

SG: I understand, you been to different places in the world, what places have you been to?

NCH: for the project we’ve been to 10 different places, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, Hong Kong Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia and of course the US. Most of the project in South East Asia, I work with this group called the south East Asia leadership network and every year they have a project and we implement a project there. Also, because of the connection in Vietnam and so for the first five more project in south east Asia but of course in the US, we’ve been doing
quite a lot of projects in the Universities and art festivals and community events.

SG: what are your goals with this project, what do you want to accomplish?

NCH: what I love about this project is that it enable me to meet and share the joy of doing art with other people. I would like to share this experience with college students and for them to use it as a community service learning and connect with the community around them and my vision is to have a chapter in every country, in every university. Basically, more than ever we need joy and creativity and I think another reason I do this project because with the technology, even though it seem like we connect, it is not in real time or real sense of connection. Not in person, not intimate. So doing art in person, I find balance.

SG: Any memories you would like to share with me?

NCH: (laughs) Maybe more specific? So about the project, we have several project in universities around the country so one of the things I want is to do more training for students so they use the project to bring the school together.