Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: LÂM TUYẾT MAI
Interviewer: Thuý Võ Đặng
Date: July 27, 2012
Location: Westminster, California
Sub-collection: Thuy Vo Dang Oral Histories
Length of interview: 01:14:58

FIELD NOTES

This interview with Lam Tuyet Mai was made possible by her son, Michael Truong, who I met at the Chinese American Museum in Los Angeles. When I met Michael, he was the director of the museum. He expressed some interest in having his mother participate. After several attempts over a few months to set up the interview, we finally settled on the Vien Dong Newspaper’s conference room on a Friday morning.

When I showed up to the interview, they were waiting for me in the lobby. The first thing Lam Tuyet Mai said to me was “you’re all so talented here [indicating the Little Saigon area or the newspaper, I wasn’t sure], I don’t know why you would want to interview me!” I spent some time articulating the importance of everyday stories, and emphasized I needed more women to participate. She seemed to be going along with everything as a favor to her son, who had driven her from Rosemead to meet me.

Michael stayed for the first thirty minutes and then left us alone to complete the interview. When I asked him to help his mother fill out the forms, especially the biographical survey, he only filled out the basic information such as name, address, etc. but pushed the forms back to me and said that he did not know the rest and that was the reason he came to me, to learn more about his mother’s story.

Lam Tuyet Mai is from the central region and her “mien Trung” accent is sometimes quite thick, but I was able to understand everything she said. She is Chinese Vietnamese and I pressed her to speak more about the dynamics between Vietnamese and Chinese people in the town where she lived in central Vietnam. She seemed somewhat hesitant about fully elaborating on the ethnic relations between Chinese and Vietnamese, but from what she said about how the Chinese community lived in neighborhoods and communities with each other—separate from the mainstream Vietnamese population, I could see where there might have been tensions that existed. In her own family, she was the only child who learned Vietnamese whereas all her six younger siblings learned only Chinese.

The interview was somewhat challenging for me as I had to ask many follow-up and leading questions. Lam Tuyet Mai spoke very generally and provided few examples, but when pressed she gave some important insights into the experiences of Chinese Vietnamese in the central region of Vietnam.