

Name of Interviewer: Katherine Fan

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Name of Person Interviewed (or pseudonym): Nhieu Ong

Name	Transcript
<i>00:01</i> Nhieu	My name is Nhieu Ong. I am an engineer at Hitachi Global Stores Technology. I live in Austin for 28 years since 1980 and here I am
Kat	You have family here [in the U.S.]?
Nhieu	Yes, I do have family here – A wife and two kids – boy is 15, girl is 13 – my parents and some of my brothers and sisters here as well.
Kat	What was life like in Vietnam when you were growing up?
Nhieu	I left Vietnam in 1971. At that time I was 19 years old – of course I can only remember back then, during the elementary, middle, high school time kind of thing. At that time, I lived in the city – Saigon – of course the war was going on at that time, but like a boy, a child, you don't recall a lot of bad memories. All I remember to me now is that the life in Vietnam at the time was good. My parents working taking care of the kids, your job is to go to school, come back, study, eat, and play with some friends. Of course, Vietnam at that time most every family has, their live-in maid to help you out so it looks like everything is comfortable and everyone lived a comfortable life.
Kat	Do you feel like your family's experience was typical of people at the time? Would you describe your family as more middle class, middle upper class?
Nhieu	Yeah, consider my family is middle class. I hate to say "middle class" but at that time my father worked for the government – forest ranger department – and my mother was a teacher in the elementary school, so if you look at it that way, in U.S. we would call it white collar workers.
Kat	How did you come to the United States? Was it with your family or as an individual?
<i>02:45</i> Nhieu	I came here with the purpose of education. After I graduated high school my father decided to send me for additional education so I graduated with a four-

year degree in Tennessee Technological University with a B.S. in electrical engineering.

Kat How did your family come here?

Nhieu My family escaped by boat in 1978 with a group of people -0 I think the boat's about 100-and some people. My family included mom, dad, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles on the boat. So half the people on the boat were my relatives. And they came here in 1978. Of course they escaped by boat, and stayed in a camp in Thailand or Malaysia, I don't remember now, for a couple of months. Then, I was able to sponsor them to come here. About half of my aunts and uncles went and settled down there in Australia. About fifty-fifty.

Kat So half of your family settled in America, and half in Australia?

Nhieu Yes.

Kat Can I ask you what was it like for you during the six years you were in college while they were in Vietnam during the war? Was it hard for you?

Nhieu While I was here, of course, I was on a student visa, and my parents supported me 100% my first year. Financially support me here. Second year they helped me some, but like tuition, room and board, but I had to work in the school - we called it work-study program, and worked outside to earn some money for personal use. After the war, 1975, right at 1975 my parents cannot support me any more. I got one more year to go – and I not really struggling, but work a little bit harder. I work in restaurant, in cafeteria, outside, weekends, you name it – everywhere possible. I was somewhat fortunate to have some grant from the schools, and I was able to get through my last year of school okay. I don't recall any hardship, anything at all, just work a little harder.

Kat How was it emotionally for you? Was it difficult to leave your family at that young age?

Nhieu 1971, actually, kind of lonely, and if I recall, left the family and came here during Christmastime in 1971. And everybody have fun time, we just meet together in smaller group of friends. We all a little homesick, a little lonely, we just communicate through the mail, of course at that time no real telephone like today. So you know, kind of homesick, and after 1975 the Communists took over. I feel really, really bad about parents over there – I don't know anything about what's going on over there, not able to be in touch, and then I kind of worry until good news come, the escape by boat.

Kat How long would it typically take for you to communicate with them after 1975? A few months?

Nhieu Every three, four months I receive a letter from them and so I know they still survive, and that's about it. So you hope and you know they're safe, but I was told they go to the camp for reeducation with the new regime over there.

Kat Do you have any stories about your experience being Vietnamese in America during or right after the war? Did you experience any discrimination?

Nhieu I think discrimination, it happened everywhere. To me, to some different people, a different perception. And personally, I don't feel being discriminated. I think discriminated or not is up to individual. If you can handle it well, you work well with people, and of course they don't discriminate you they love you more or no matter what you look like but if you can get along with them well I don't see any discrimination. Of course you could see some favor of this, favor of that, but that's the human being natures. I didn't consider big discrimination in U.S.

08:20

Kat Did you find a helpful Vietnamese community when you were in Tennessee? Or were there Americans who helped you out?

Nhieu Yes, I remember when we came here in 1971 there's really not a whole lot of Vietnamese, and every time you find some Vietnamese you feel so happy and they will welcome you like family. I'll give you a quick story about one summer in 1973. A couple friends and I traveled to California, to San Francisco, and we started looking for some Vietnamese people so we can talk, and maybe a restaurant to eat or something like that. And we found a phone book and a couple of... and called them up, and they just said "Hang on the bus, we'll be right there to pick you up," and took us home, spent 5 days in their house, no trouble at all. And you can tell how friendly we are when you don't have a whole lot of Vietnamese people around you and at that time, really, very, very few Vietnamese students around. So wherever you go you're looking for them, and they support you just like family.

Kat And you were in Tennessee at the time, you said?

Nhieu Yes. Yes.

Kat Was there a large Vietnamese community?

Nhieu Very small group of Vietnamese students at the time, about ten. We all knew each other.

Kat How did you come to Texas?

Nhieu After graduated, I worked in Minnesota for two years, and I transferred out to Austin with IBM at the time. So they transferred me down with a project and I lived in Austin since 1980. I worked for IBM and in Austin from 1980 until a few years ago. Of course the last two years I am no longer working for IBM and have changed companies several times.

Kat Have you found a larger Vietnamese community in Austin or in Texas?

Nhieu Of course, when I came in 1980 it's just a small group of Vietnamese people. I would say about 5, 6 thousand. And I'll be honest with you, I've lived in Austin for 28 years now; I consider myself an Austinite. I've seen the community grow from now – I really don't know the exact number; tell you the truth, I may be off – but

maybe 20, 30 thousand. You can tell by the growth in the business around town. We got the Chinatown mall, the other mall at the corner of Braker and North Lamar, and a big one coming up in Parmer Lane. So by looking at the business in Austin I could tell the Vietnamese population is growing significantly.

Kat So what has life been for you in the U.S.? Maybe specifically tell me about when or where you met your wife? Was it when you were in school, or in Minnesota, or in Austin?

Nhieu OK, this is kind of personal, but I'll tell you I met my wife in Houston, through another relative members – my second generation aunt – she knew my wife and introduced her to me and we kind of friends for a couple years and here I am, two kids. So it was after I moved to Texas. She's Vietnamese as well.

Kat Was there a Vietnamese community already here in Texas when you arrived? Or do you feel like you had a major part in developing that?

Nhieu When I came here the Vietnamese community was already established and I was involved with some activity at the time, for instance – the senior citizens association was here already when I came here in 1980. I remember that association was in a very small office on North Lamar and it moved around a few times until now. I helped the Vietnamese senior citizens groups in occasionally like New Year celebration but I'm not really consider myself an active member in the community because of work-related and family-related activity and personal goal. I'm not really full time active.

13:40

Kat How easy do you feel it was for you to get involved – how did you find out about the senior citizens?

Nhieu I know some senior members at the association, and some of them is just parents of my friends. Of course, at that time we were a small Vietnamese group and you know everyone, almost. And I just feel like when they need something I can roll my sleeves and help them out. And I feel I work real well with them. I wish I could do more, but I now I'm really tied up with too many things so helping community, helping senior citizens group is not really my priority at this moment, but I can help whenever I can.

Kat Is your religion a big part of your life?

Nhieu Yes, I consider myself a Buddhist. Buddhism plays a major role in my life, I have to admit that, because before I know that or Buddhist teaching I kind of live the way I'm thinking it should be but when I dig into more about Buddhist religion I see so many good teaching which can help me personally and personal life to overcome difficulty for example or teach me or train me how to be a cool guy, a patient guy, and let go of things, don't attach too much to it because suffering is the key of our life. The longer I live the more I realize suffering is always there. Depending on how we handle it we can change suffering around to happiness. In short, I feel religion is a part of my life.

Kat Were your parents Buddhist? How were you first exposed to it?

Nhieu We are traditionally Buddhist. When I was in Vietnam, I was in the Buddhist youth group, similar to boy scouts, don't know much about the teaching, more of a cultural thing, not really learn much, much like people here go to church every Sunday. My parents are Buddhist, but as far as teaching me, guiding me on that religion, the answer is no, I just learn it from my own, and when I recall the first opportunity for me to learn or to be a part of the religion here is because the temple here was established in 1983.

Kat Was that the first time you started seeking more for yourself?

Nhieu Yes, at first I was just here, helping out, and some how I got hooked, I got clicked with the religion, and I just devote more time to helping something I believe in because I still believe the temple is a place for people to come and looking for some teaching to help their lives.

Kat Tell me more about how you got involved with helping establish the temple.

17.30

Nhieu When it was first established we rented a small duplex on Airport Blvd. and Guadalupe St. close to Highland Mall. The duplex was about 400 sq. ft. We converted it into a place for the people to come worship and for the monk to live, thing like that. We recognize that more and more people come every day and not enough space for them to worship and we started thinking about purchasing some land to build a bigger place. In 1983, that's when we established the temple, and then in 1985 we purchased land in Leander and started building the temple with 1500 sq. ft. only, and now the temple in Leander is growing over 3000 sq. foot until now we have a decent, big enough to hold a couple hundred people on the major celebration, such as Buddha's birthday or New Year.

Kat How many people do you see come out regularly? What size is your congregation?

Nhieu Buddhist is different from Catholic or any other church. Everything is up to the individual. We have a big crowd during the few major ceremonies, full moon in January, April, September, October, things like that, we have 500, 600 people in Leander. This place in Duval is just a satellite temple during the weekend or any time they need to worship, instead of going to Leander which is a 30-minute drive. So people can come in whenever they feel like they need to. The temple is open all day long until about 10 p.m. I see people come by and burn incense by himself or herself at 8 p.m. and get out.

Kat Do you feel having a temple here or in Leander has had a significant effect on the Vietnamese community here in Austin?

Nhieu I really feel it has helped the people out. One particular benefit I can see is this activity center here about 5--6000 sq. ft. Every Sunday we have 180 kids come here to learn Vietnamese, and ranging from 6 years old until high school level, like 15, 16, 17. We have 180 kids come here every Sunday. We have a staff

teaching Vietnamese, about 30, and a ratio of student and teachers of 6 to one. And all the staff here is completely volunteer.

22:10

Besides the language we have the activity called Buddhist youth group, very similar to the program we have in Vietnam like Boy Scouts. And since we don't have enough staff running that kind of activity we have the event once a month. This runs after Vietnamese class from 1-3. We play with them on the playground, we have some song for them to sing in Vietnamese, traditional songs, we have a camp coming up for them during spring break in Leander for Saturday and Sunday. It's a chance or opportunity for the kids to bond together. To me, that's really good because for the kids to stay in front of TV on Saturday or Sunday, two hours, I'd rather have them get out and do something.

Of course the temple has a major impact on helping people because like I said, Buddhist temple has really helped the people enhance the life. Anxiety, stress, whatever you name it - I feel like if someone can practice right or properly the Buddhist teaching, they can help their personal life. Doesn't have to be Buddhist to practice Buddhist teaching, because it's a way of life, like a medicine to cure the mental problem. So that's the beauty of Buddhism to me.

Kat

With that goal in mind, do you see people of other ethnicities coming to this temple often?

Nhieu

I recognize that people come here with the same goals we talk about – for right now, we only see Vietnamese, but my goal is to expand that. Back about ten years ago we did have the meditations sessions for non-Vietnamese speaking people. We have American, we have people from Sri Lanka, we have people from India, you name it. We get together once a month, we chanting a little bit, we do meditation for 30 minutes, we discussed the dharma (Buddhist teaching), and after that we eat, we share the vegetarian lunch. And to me, that's the half-day activities, good for people. I consider in the future if time allows, if my personal time allows and facility is good enough, I will expand it to the American people.

26:50

Kat

Do you feel it's difficult to reach second-generation Vietnamese children? For example, maybe many of them perhaps influenced by their American culture?

Nhieu

From experience with my two kids, I have to keep an eye on them all the time. Because the culture here is different. My father doesn't have to say whole lot to me before I correct myself. Every now and then I am out of line and my father disciplined me and I learned that lesson forever. One funny story is my brother and I snuck into the theater. We asked a grownup to take us in. At that time adults can bring children into the theater without no tickets. We had no seat, we stand around; we watched that movie for the couple of hours. My father was real mad because frustration from my father, all he told me was lay down, and he caned me – and I all just did was stand up and say, "Daddy, I am sorry, I won't do it again."

Today, I cannot do that to my kid. I have to beg them and plead them and say "Don't do this." So, it's all backwards. This country has a lot of good things but

you cannot discipline them. Kind of blend of the culture in Vietnam and the U.S. to find what the mutual viewpoint is, work for them, and work for us.

I've found some compromises, of course. I still yell and screaming because I say thing to him nicely first, they don't do anything. I give him a second chance, a third chance, discipline him with some consequence. For example, for one month, no video games, take it away, little punishment, let him remember that "Hey, because you don't take care of yourself, good thing Mom and Dad tell you, this is what happens to you." Of course, I cannot say "lay down" and whip him because I might go to jail... or police come and get me because I abuse to the kid. So a lot of things you have to balance out. You cannot use the old way in Vietnam although the old way may work. So, to me raising the kids in this country is a challenge because you cannot say, "Hey, I am a Vietnamese, 90%, I will apply this technique to you." It will not work. They are born and raised here, influenced by the culture here, around, so you have to find a way to educate them and train them, to take care and hopefully, they become good citizens.

31:20

Kat

As a parent, what do you hope your children keep of your culture? What are your hopes for your kids here?

Nhieu

The hope is for them to grow up, become good citizens, good person himself, even though if they cannot finish education the way I want. I still want them to become a good person, because if I look around, way back 20 years ago, parents say "Education, education, education." You have to have a degree to have a good career. But these days it is not true any more. If you work hard, a good person, you can find many different ways to be successful in society. This is why America is called the land of opportunity. You can earn it. You can be successful. You look around and see so many famous people. Michael Dell. Steve Jobs. Bill Gates. Of course they are special but...of course education is a plus, always. I don't deny that. But I hope for my kids to be a good person.