

Name of Interviewer: Dean Pham

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Name of Person Interviewed: Lan Bui Pham

Relationship to Interviewer: Mother

Name	Transcript
	<i>00:01</i>
Dean	Hello, this is Dean Pham from Asian-American Studies 330. This is my oral history report. I am interviewing my mom. [Translated] Mom, state your name.
Lan	[Translated] I am Lan Pham.
Dean	What was it like where you grew up?
Lan	[Translated] I don't remember much but when I started to recognize things in life, I was about three, four years old. I remember living with my mom, your grandmother, and three older sisters and one younger brother. Your grandfather at the time had been captured in the North so growing up, I didn't have him but I was still very happy and fulfilled with my mom and my siblings.
Dean	What was your life like as a child? [Translated] Did you play a lot or did you just go to school?
Lan	[Translated] In Vietnam at the time, we had friends and our family is Catholic so I had friends in my religion class, so I had fun. But we only played around in the local neighborhoods or in the schoolyard but it was a lot of fun.
Dean	How were you disciplined as a child? [Translated] When you were young and you misbehaved, did Grandmother hit you or made you kneel?
Lan	[Translated] Well I didn't have my father, your grandfather, but Grandmother was both Mom and Dad. She loved us but she was also very strict with me and my sisters, so usually if anyone misbehaved, she would make us kneel but she didn't hit us. She'd make us kneel and lecture us, things like that. But I was really

scared of Grandmother because she played the role of both father and mother so she was really strict so there was fear.

Dean What was a typical day like in Vietnam? [Translated] What time would you wake up? [Overlapping with Lan's response.]

Lan [Translated] At that time in Vietnam, I remember from the time I was young all the way up until I left Vietnam, going to school in Vietnam was only half a day. Early in the morning, we would go to church. Then we'd come back home, eat breakfast and prepare to go to school and take a nap at noon. So just things like that, nothing too complicated, especially since at the time, I was still little.

Dean Where did you live during the war? [Translated] Do you remember where you lived?

Lan [Translated] I still lived in the old house and by that, the street before 1975, the name was Nguyễn Huỳnh Đức which is close to the street Trương Minh Giảng, about an hour away from downtown Saigon. I was really young but I still heard the news, I heard over the radio and TV about the war. It was really scary but I wasn't exposed to the war up close in front of my very own eyes but in 1968, the year of the Mau Than offensive, I remember the communists, that year was Tet. But I just remember just before Tet, bullets were everywhere and the communist soldiers came out onto the streets. I didn't see anything because Grandmother pushed us all under the table to hide because bullets were flying everywhere outside. But after that, I'm not sure because I was still so young, about six years old so I don't remember exactly when the bullets stopped but there was a lot of fear. But our family didn't run away since the battle was short so we didn't go anywhere.

Dean Were any family members involved in the war? [Translated] Grandfather?

Lan [Translated] Grandfather. In 1955, Grandfather and Grandmother went to the South. I just know that Grandmother told us that she and Grandfather stayed in the countryside for a few years and then they moved to Thành Ông Năm, but I'm not sure how far from Saigon it is. Grandfather went into the army in 1960 or so and he stayed in Saigon, on the street Yên Đổ. At the time, Grandmother brought me and your uncle. Before that, Grandfather worked in part with the CIA, he was apart of the Special Forces. He was sent out to work in the North and was caught in 1963 and at the time, I was only a few months old.

06:58

Dean [Translated] So Grandfather was brought into a re-education camp, or was he in prison?

Lan [Translated] Well he was caught and because he was working with the Americans, that's a very high crime to the communists. When I met up with him later on in life, he told me that he was forced to stay underground. So for seven years, he didn't see the sun or the moon. After those seven years, he was moved to a prison room aboveground and he was able to see light and he stayed there for a good number of years. Because of the conditions he was in, Grandfather became very ill. In 1980, he was released when the communists had already taken over South Vietnam.

Dean

What was life after the war?

Lan

After 1975, I guess I was thirteen years old, I remember it was very chaotic. At the time, Grandmother worked for [indistinct background noise], well when Grandfather was caught in 1963, Grandmother just made and sold food. After that, she made rice and cleaned for a building, I can't remember what it's called but it's near Tân Sơn Nhất Airport. She made rice and cooked for American and South Vietnamese workers. After 1975, it was very scary but luckily, Grandmother had a lot of help from Americans who helped her to find ways to get to Guam. At the time, I still remember, I was in a building ready to go on the helicopter but it couldn't land because the communists were shooting. I remember being very afraid because all around me were bullets and debris and the surrounding area of Saigon, it had already been the 29th day, March, 1975. I remember it was very chaotic, everyone was in fear. All around was fire and debris so the helicopters couldn't land to get us so we had to stay back. The next morning, we walked back home and we saw that the communists were already taking over and South Vietnamese soldiers were in Jeeps and tanks and bullets were still being fired so it was a scary moment. After that, everyone who returned home, people were rounded up to go to re-education campus. I was too young to be considered to enter re-education camp, but people like older relatives, uncles, aunts were more easily targeted. And people like the South Vietnamese troops. We were told that they would only be in camp for three days but they were gone for a much longer period of time. We thought Grandfather had already died but our family had family members and relatives and friends in the neighborhood who went to the re-education camps for what we thought would be three days but it was very long. Some people died and it was scary because communists kept looking through our homes and asking all sorts of questions. And my education, I can tell more clearly. Going to school was not the same as it was in the past. It changed completely. Everything we learned was meant to praise the regime and the ideology of teachings of communism. We learned about Lenin's teachings. By then, I was in ninth or tenth grade. We didn't have time to play but instead, we had to make weapons. Every week, we had to make a certain number of weapons and if we didn't make enough, we didn't high enough grades. So we had to do that and people would bring knives and things like that from home to school to make products. I remember in the summer, we had to test from level two to level three. Even if we had high enough scores, we still had to practice shooting, throw bombs, exercise in the way soldiers did. We had to practice how to throw, crawl. The teenage years were not the same as they had been in the past. They brainwashed the youth at the time all of the communist ideals. So Grandfather was caught when I was just a few months old so it was just a mom and her children. But our life was, I have to say it was very comfortable. Grandmother sold food and cooked for Americans or other people, so it was very comfortable. I remember Grandmother would always run back and forth working nonstop and me and Bac Thay, my older sister, tried to help buy things to help. But I didn't know how to do anything outside of school but I was old enough to realize that all around me, people were struggling and life was hard for them. In terms of religion, Buddhist or Catholic, we still had to go to school and meetings all the time so sometimes we couldn't even go to church. So the time period from 1975 to 1979, before I left, times were very difficult in every aspect.

18:01

Dean [Translated] Tell me about your immigration experiences. Did you go before Grandmother, did you go by yourself, or did you go with relatives?

Lan So starting in 1979, starting where is not clear but people started hiding and leaving the country of Vietnam. People would walk or go by boat. In 1977, Grandfather was given permission to write letters home so at that time, our family found out he was still alive. In the letter, he wrote of difficult times and told us to find less difficult roads to leave, and all around, mothers and children and friends were pooling money to leave by boat to leave by sea. My aunt joined with other people to pay to leave by boat to leave by sea. Grandmother was already heartbroken and in pain to let me and Cau Duc, my little brother, leave. So at the time Bac Hien, my brother-in-law was also with me. We went together with other families who went by boat. If you want me to go into detail my journey on the sea... Well in order to go, we had to leave everything from our country, everyone was so sad. I cried, at the time I was only about sixteen or seventeen. Our fate in Vietnam was hazy but the future in front of us, we didn't know if we were going to die or live, but we'd rather risk death than stay behind because we'd surely die that way, too and we couldn't do anything about it. We had to borrow money to leave so we promised once we got to the U.S., we would repay the money. The amount it took for me and Cau Duc to leave in 1979, the amount was \$10,000. So it was a very large amount but I believed once I got to the U.S., I could repay the sum, so I decided to leave. We were in the sea for four days, twice, we were robbed. But the robbery wasn't like pirates in the stories or movies or in the past robberies on the sea, but they were Thai fishermen who knew Vietnamese or Chinese people from Vietnam were leaving the country, so they targeted people like us. So I was robbed twice. My boat was robbed twice but fortunately, the women and girls were not raped because a lot of other boats had women and girls raped and thrown into the sea. So my four-day journey was filled with thirst and hunger and fear of being robbed, but when we were farther away from Thailand's coast, I was thankful our boat didn't turn out like the boats of others, where the women and girls were raped, people were killed or the ship was sunken. I arrived on the shores and stayed there for ten months, called Pulaubidong, where 40,000 other refugees stayed. [Dean – this was a refugee camp, right?] Yes, refugee camp. Upon arriving at the camp, there was something else that made me fearful. We heard from the people who stayed there that the Malaysian authorities will force all the refugees back into sea because no other country was accepting refugees, so they would force us all out. At the time, everyone was very scared and I thought, "Well if we go back into sea, it's better to die there than return home since the government will kill us." Luckily, at the time, Malaysian authorities began setting up ways to get refugees to leave and Bac Nhan, in 1975, Bac Nhan is my older sister, was able to escape by boat and she came to the U.S. with her three children while her husband had to stay back and went with me. Bac Nhan is the one who petitioned for me, Cau Duc, and Bac Hien to come to the U.S. After ten months in the refugee camp, there was a lot of illness and grief from worry and fear and the sadness of leaving Vietnam. There's no way I could ever forget that time in my life.

25:10

Dean [Translated] When you came the U.S., what was the hardest thing about starting your life? You learned English over in Vietnam, right?

Lan In Vietnam, before 1975, I went up to seventh grade, so starting around sixth or seventh grade, I learned some English vocabulary, grammar. When the communists came, people learned Chinese, Russian, and English. But in that time period, our family had many difficulties so I didn't really focus on my studies because in school, even in learning English, we were taught Lenin's teachings so it was very boring and I quickly lost interesting. But on the island, there were classes to learn English. When I came to America, it was very difficult to try and adapt to this new life. When I came over, the papers said my birth date was in October so I was not eighteen yet. I was still allowed to attend high school. I took tests and they did the paperwork for me to go into the eleventh grade. I was only in the eleventh grade for a few months because Bac Nhan was really sick and weak and she had three children and her husband had just come over so she couldn't take care of me. At the time, I wasn't familiar with how things worked and I asked to leave high school and start working. I remember I had to go City Hall to ask for the sheet for people who are underage to start working. I worked two jobs. My first job was from seven in the morning to three-thirty. I sewed. The first state I came to was Louisiana, where I sewed. And from four-thirty to eleven at night, I worked at a Chinese restaurant. The Chinese restaurant belonged to people from Hong Kong so they couldn't speak Vietnamese, so I learned English from working and being around co-workers. So I had to work those two jobs from morning to night since I still had to pay debt from traveling by boat, and Grandfather and Grandmother and older relatives were still in Viet Nam. I had to worry about my life and Cau Duc's life in America. So I had to work, for life here in the U.S., and life in Vietnam. So at the age of seventeen or eighteen, my goal was go back to school and become a teacher because in Vietnam, I was interested in teaching but coming over here, I still didn't know what I wanted to study. But my main goal was to back to school first, but it's not easy. It's very difficult I didn't have my parents and I had sister but she already had a family so I didn't really have any support but my own strength and will to work those two jobs from morning to night so I could have money to take care of my life and Cau Duc's life here and help back in Vietnam. So it was very difficult. At the end of each week, there was a church, there was a man who taught English back in Vietnam so I learned English from him each week. Listening to Americans speak was difficult because they speak very quickly, and over in Vietnam, the pronunciation is different and I didn't pronounce words correctly, so coming over here, that situation was very difficult. But during that time, I tried really hard, especially by listening to the news and talk shows. I learned a lot from those talk shows, the news, movies and especially from co-workers because they could explain things to us and clarify words. Slowly, it became comfortable.

32:03

Dean [Translated] When you first came to the U.S., did you ever racism or discrimination from Americans?

Lan [Translated] No, I wasn't discriminated against by white people, or black people. I never had anyone call me names or anything like that. They just had one issue

and they asked, "When you Vietnamese come over here, you don't have to pay any taxes, do you? You go to work and you don't have to pay taxes, right? You've already received so much help from American authorities, haven't you? You received a lot of benefits from companies, right?" There were some people who truly didn't know or they had a racist mindset. My English wasn't that well to go into detail but I did get the point across that we came over as refugees and the Americans took us in without any conditions like claiming citizenship or requiring us to have any businesses here. We are refugees and I did not claim any benefits so I paid taxes exactly like any other American and the company I worked for treated me the same as everyone else. I didn't receive any special attention or benefits than anyone else. That's what I explained to them. But I never had anyone call me a name to think that I was a victim of racism.

Dean What do you think of the U.S. policy during and after the war?

Lan [Translated] I was too young during that time period to know why and the real reason behind the war. But I can tell, when I came over here to the U.S., organizations were forming and Vietnamese communities were getting bigger and bigger because more Vietnamese were coming from other countries and more from Vietnam through the H.O. program, in which soldiers from Vietnam were able to come over. There were also people, both Vietnamese and American who wrote books and were on talk shows. I listened and read a lot. I think the policy of America is whatever America does it for the security of the country. In regards to Vietnam at the time, maybe Vietnam was threatening American security and they were afraid of Chinese influence and there were deals made that I don't understand clearly. But I know that the Americans wanted to help Vietnam, wanted to help South Vietnam, to become an independent and democratic Vietnam. But afterwards, there was a policy from Henry Kissinger to Vietnam and Jews at the time. There was probably a deal with China so maybe that's why the U.S. abandoned South Vietnam. They wanted to help South Vietnam but abandoning South Vietnam was probably just a change in policy. There has been some progress. You're interviewing me now in 2008. A few years before this, President Bill Clinton has visited Vietnam. Senator John McCain also went to Vietnam. The policy between the U.S. communist Vietnam has changed. I think American policy is that whatever they do is for the safety of America, for the United States, for the people and safety, with their point-of-view of the Asian side. That's all I can elaborate on and there's nothing we can really do in regards to American policy but in my heart, if the Americans had helped South Vietnam all the way to keep its separate state, I would be happier and there wouldn't be so many problems. You know that about two million people were killed, jailed, or died escaping by sea. But the people who came here or Canada or other countries, we have so much more freedom, in every aspect. I just think that if the U.S. had helped South Vietnam completely, things would've been better. Right now in Vietnam, girls are being kidnapped and sold to other countries and I think America knows this problem so I can only guess that if America really cares for Vietnam, then they should strengthen their policies.

Dean [Translated] Do you still have family in Vietnam? Bac Nu?

Lan [Translated] I still have an older sister who also has a family, with four children. Dad has some sisters and one sister is a nun over in Vietnam, so that's all. And all the grandparents have already passed away.

43:39

Dean Do you still keep in touch with Bac Nu? [Translated] Do you call or write letters?

Lan I still keep in touch by calling her.

Dean [Translated] You've gone back to Vietnam, haven't you?

Lan I went back once, in 2003 and I never want to return again because as a Vietnamese person, we remember our home country. I'm like that too – I still remember my past, it was a past without communists. I don't want to go back. I don't want to go back because I don't want to see my homeland completely changed. It's good to see big homes and trains, two-story homes, but the faith and personality of Vietnam has changed dramatically. I came back in 2003 for ten days. Coming and going was ten days total because Grandmother [Dad's mother] was very ill and she wanted to visit Bac Hoa, the nun, Sister Hoa in Vietnam. So I came over to see the paperwork to see if I could get Bac Hoa over to see Grandmother one last time. But the American authorities did not give her permission to come over because they were scared she might stay permanently. After her interview, I wasn't sure what went on but she wasn't allowed to come over. During those ten days, the feeling I had of not wanting to ever return to Vietnam was stronger because everything had changed. Their thinking has changed. There's no more faith. I was very sad. On the plane, I had already cried for Vietnam and arriving back the U.S., I think I will never return. I can't do anything for my homeland anymore but I always pray for the country of Vietnam. If there are still communists, it needs to be a different communist country, not the one right now.

47:25

Dean [Translated] When you came back to Vietnam, did the people know you escaped? Was there any resentment?

Lan [Translated] Well we had to hide. The boats were hidden. Going this way, I had to leave school but we still had a meeting each week. The people knew I was absent so they asked Grandmother where I was and said she didn't know. So she lied but they kept on asking. She said, "I yelled at her so she left the house. I don't know where she went." At the time, they did not let us leave.

Dean [Translated] So you came over to the U.S. before Grandmother? [Overlapping response]

Lan I left in 1979 and went to Pulaubidong for ten months so I came over to the U.S. in 1980. It took exactly five years for me to become a U.S. citizen. After gaining citizenship, I petitioned for Grandmother to come over. And Grandfather, in 1982, 1980, they released him to visit the family – but only to visit since he was still a prisoner of war. They let him visit because he was so sick and about to die so when he came home, Grandmother took him to another city to hide to help him healthier and to find a way for him to escape by sea. He made it to Thailand, losing some more years. There, he came into contact with other American soldiers who helped him enter the U.S. At that time, I added his name to the petition. So close to ten years, Grandmother finally came over to America.

Dean [Translated] When you came back to Vietnam in 2003, you visited Bac Nu, Bac Hoa. Did you visit your childhood friends, or were you too young to keep in contact with them? [Overlapping response]

Lan I don't have any news from my school friends in the past because some traveled by sea and may have died. Or some married and the wives followed their husbands' family elsewhere that I don't know. Or some went to America or Canada, I don't know clearly so I have no one else but a few neighbors and I did visit them.

52:04

Dean [Translated] When you were over in Vietnam, did you go to church every morning or just once a week?

Lan [Translated] In Vietnam, our house was right in front of the church, so every morning, I went to mass.

01:00:01

Dean [Translated] Does our family keep an altar to pray to our grandparents?

Lan Of course. Vietnamese people, well each country has their own traditions but our family is Roman Catholic. So every family has an altar: on top is for God, underneath is for Mary and the saints. We always have a portrait of the grandparents to remember them. Right now, we have an altar for the grandparents who have all passed away. Each night, we pray for the souls of our grandparents and ancestors. Especially holidays like Tet, we have flowers and fruits as a sacrifice and we pray and remember the grandparents. To pray, we offer that new year to God.

Dean [Translated] Do you have a singer or a song that when you listen to, you think back of Vietnam?

Lan Oh, there are many songs. We have a lot of music that when we listen to, we're minded of our past a lot. The one I remember most is "Tinh Ca" from the singer, Pham Duy.

Dean What will become of Vietnamese culture in the United States, or is it important to keep cultural identity? [Translated] When you look at me, or Duy or Macy, or other Vietnamese children born in the U.S., what do you think?

Lan Here in the U.S., people call it "melting pot." When you make a soup, as you already know, it's not all water or all meat but there are many things, this vegetable, that vegetable. It all combines to make a very good soup. The U.S. is like that, too. I think the culture of Vietnam is very beautiful. I think the Vietnamese youth will do a lot for the U.S. because they have faith. Usually, parents want their children to become a doctor or a lawyer. There are many occupations, like nurses and teachers. There are many things parents want their children to be. I think those youth who have faith, have respect and obedience to their parents, know how to love their siblings and help them and follow their parents and teach their own children how to lead a the life of a good person, well these qualities will help improve America.

01:06:18

Dean [Translated] Comparing the culture in Vietnam and culture here in the U.S., do you think the children in Vietnam have more respect for their parents and grandparents versus over here in the U.S.?

Lan [Translated] If it's like exactly how it was in the past when I was in Vietnam, you need to remember that Vietnam has 4,000 years of history. In the family, there's a term, "tề gia, trị quốc, bình thiên hạ." "Tề gia" means that... why is it the family first, and then "trị quốc" and then "bình thiên hạ?" The family is the most important and comes first. In the family, there must be order: grandparents, mother and father, children, brothers and sisters. You must love each other. "Trị quốc" refers to after the family unit is in harmony, we can then work on making our country richer and better. "Bình thiên hạ" is when our country becomes more powerful. But now with the communists, they've completely changed everything. Now people just worry about eating and drinking, fighting with each other to see who can be on top, who will be the person who makes more money. There's no faith involved. So if you ask me if the culture in Vietnam is better than over here, the culture of America, I will say, "No." I will say, "No." Even in the past, the culture of Vietnam had some things that were bad that we should have don't away with. For example, especially in the case of becoming a bride. She take a husband and follow him home and anything the husband says, the bridge must do or wherever he tells her to sit, she must do so. This is something we should not do. Or when it comes to parents. Everyone wants their children to become somebody or someone or something. Everyone wants that. But there are some parents who force their children to study things that the children have no desire or they don't like the subject. Even in the U.S., it's similar – there are some things aren't good and some things that are. The good things must be improved and we the bad things need to be reduced. That's what I think.

Dean This is the conclusion of the oral history report. [Translated] Thank you, Mom.

Lan Thank you.