

Name of Interviewer: Martha Rodriguez

Method of Recording Interview: Digital audio

Name of Person Interviewed: Thieu Dang

Location of interview: University of Texas Libraries, Perry Castaneda, Austin, Texas

Date of interview: September 26, 2008

Track 1- 00:19

Thieu So have you not hear about President here in Vietnam?

Martha No

Thieu No

(Translator- unintelligible)

Thieu Laughs

Martha I liked to thank you for coming, first of all, here

Thieu No problem

Martha And I appreciate it and I am just going to ask you some questions

Thieu Sure

Martha Well fist of all, what was it like while you were growing up? And where did you grow up?

Thieu I grow up in Vietnam. I was born in North Vietnam and then we moved to South Vietnam in 1954

Martha How was it when you were growing up? Where you discipline?

Thieu At the time my parents sent me there so, so young you know, 10 years old

Martha Do you feel like you belong to the North more?

Thieu Well sometime, sometime, sometime, but I grew up in South from 10years old, 11 years old until adult until I am 29 years old so I feel more comfortable with the South.

Martha What was your typical daily routine in Vietnam?

Thieu You ask about when, young or old?

Martha Both

Thieu Both. I graduate from High School in 1961
[Translator]

Thieu Oh, I lived by myself and 2 brothers

Martha Oh, by yourself, and what would you do everyday?

Thieu Study, My older brother go to war and they support me and my brother, my older brother, so I go to school.

Martha And you would just go to school?

Thieu So I go to school until I graduate from high school

Martha And after that, what did you do?

Thieu I continued to the University and I graduate

Martha Oh that's good

Thieu I graduate from University of Saigon in 1964, long time ago, 44 years ago
[laugh]

Martha [laugh]

Thieu Long time ago huh?

Martha Where you in any organizations during {interruption Thieu: Yeah} When you went to the University?

Thieu In here or in.... You have to remember that I come to attend the University of Florida after graduate school in 1970 and then I go back to Vietnam in December 1974

Martha What made you come to the United States to study here?

Thieu Yeah in 19...

Martha What made you come?

[Translator]

Thieu My government support me yeah I had a scholarship. Ok let me explain to you. When I graduate from the University of Saigon in 1964 I worked at the University of Saigon from 64 until 70 and then I get a scholarship and attend University of Florida from January or February 70 until December 74 and then I go back to Vietnam and I come back here again in 1980.

Martha Oh okay

Thieu So lot of things happen in my life

Martha Ok, so where you in any organizations here in the United States

Thieu Now?

Martha No when you were going to the University of Florida

Thieu No, not belong to any organizations

Martha So what made you go back after you graduated? Was it the war?

Thieu Yes, I taught at the University of Saigon, a professor at the University

Martha Are you still a professor now?

Thieu No, not here when I come here 1981 I go to city of Houston I am a city employee

[Laughs] A lot of things happen to me you know, my life so rich. You understand that?

Martha Yes

Thieu In North Vietnam, in South Vietnam, and the University of Florida and then go back under the communist rule for 5 years and then come back here working for University and work for people

[Translator]

Martha So that was your relation to the war? Going over there to teach or where you in the war?

Track 1- 5:02

Thieu Yes you can say yes since 1964 until 70 that is the war, but I still work in the University of Saigon at that time.

Martha Did you experience any..

Thieu No I did not experience any days in the army, nothing

Martha Where any of your family members involved in the war?

Thieu That is fortunately or unfortunately, I don't know how to explain it, my whole family in the South or in the North nobody involved in the war at all, I don't know why.

[Translator]

Martha I read in your bio that you were captured by communist and put in re-education camp

[Translator]
Thieu No, not me
Martha [Pause] did you or your family suffer anything in result to the war?
Thieu Suffering from the war? That is only indirectly,
[Translator speaking]
my brother here he was in the north since childhood until now, still living in [undistinguishable] during the wartime he cannot attend school because I am living in the South. You know what I mean? That is the communist regime they prohibit the relatives who have relatives in South they cannot attend school, no high school no college.
Martha Because you lived in the South
Thieu Yes, that there policy
[Translator: That's their policy]
Thieu That very different you see different, new for you
Martha Yes very new for me. Did you come in contact with any American soldiers during the war?
Thieu During the war you have to say exactly when because during the war half my time is in Vietnam and half my time in the United States.
Martha So while in Vietnam did you encounter any soldiers?
Thieu Yes, sure, a lot of American soldiers there
Martha What did you think about them?
Thieu Well, I think that they come to my country to help my people something like that, but somehow from economic respect I cannot expand because there a lot of things going on in that time anyhow in general we appreciate them to come to our country
Martha [Pause] so you left Vietnam to come to the University here and then you went back
Thieu Yes, about three months before (South) Saigon fell
Martha And then you came back. How was your decision to leave?
Thieu I graduate in December 1974 and I decided to come back because at that time we know that very clear that time that the South Vietnam lost, everybody know that and that I decided to come back because that time that was my feelings and I thought that during the war lot of people in the war died and lot of people suffering why am so lucky, I don't have to spend any days in the army or war, why? So I decided to come back, look like (undistinguishable) I for my country, any regime I don't care South Vietnam, or North Vietnam that is my country I don't care so I decide to come back.
Martha Was it hard to get over here? Was it hard to come to the United States?
Thieu What do you mean?
Martha Like problems traveling?
Thieu I cannot travel during the time I studied in the United States I cannot travel go straight to school
Track 1- 10:09
Martha Did you keep in touch with your family?
Thieu Yes, sure
Martha How did you keep in touch?

Thieu By letter that's it
Martha Was it hard for you?
Thieu It was very hard for me because at that time I had a wife and two children at that time. It was hard for me to spend almost six years here
[Translator: When you got here you escaped from your country, you escaped the second time in 1981]
Martha How did you escape?
Thieu By boat like the others
Martha Did you have to pay?
Thieu Yeah
Martha Did you pay a lot?
Thieu A lot of money
Martha How was your experience in the boat?
Thieu Well we were a very small boat and we had 120 people and we almost died because of two storms at that time during the trip, we spent almost a week 7 days and 7 nights in the high sea, two big storms there and we almost died but thank god.
Martha In what county did you end up?
Thieu Indonesia
Martha Were there any crucial questions that the officials would ask you?
Thieu No, but that time when I came to the camp to the Indonesia camp I was the Chairman of the Camp, they asked me to be the Chairman so no problem at all, only the US delegate ask me about that, Where I studied and how I have experience in Vietnam when I come back, something like that
Martha Was it like, tell me this and tell me that
Thieu Yes, sure, they had to do that
Martha So you think it was right for them to do that?
Thieu Yeah, they have to do that because at that time there was a lot of spies, a lot of Vietnamese spies, because they were traitors
Martha How did Vietnamese spies look like?
Thieu Like us in our country
Martha So how would you differentiate them?
Thieu The way they talk, and we know that
Martha That's incredible. Did you travel alone in the boat, you by yourself not with your family?
Thieu By myself
[Translator: He has a lot of stories to tell you from the camp]
Martha What happened in the camp?
Thieu People have their own stories when they come to the camp, they explain from the (undistinguishable) and a lot of people are suffering. When I think about that I am so sad I am still sad.
Martha How long where you in the camp for?
Thieu Exactly 1 year, I arrived in [Name of Camp] camp in first of June and I left the camp in 30th of May exactly one year.
Martha What kinds of things did they make you do in the camp?

Thieu I talk to the people the newcomers we interviewed them, distribution of food from UN, United Nations, we distributed and we did some (undistinguishable) and vegetable for the people and we distribute water, lot of things going on at camp not war and we all volunteers.

Martha So in the camp did you make any friends?

Thieu A lot of friends, but we try to make people unhappy forget the past and forget the trip during the sea a lot of people most of the people suffering from the sea, pirate and relatives die at sea. You remember that 1/3, according to the statistics of UN, United Nations, only 2/3 of people that left Vietnam arrived and 1/3 died in the sea, so lot of people died in the sea. So in the camp a lot of people had relative die in the sea all (undistinguishable) suffering

Track 1- 15:16

Martha How did you feel when you were in the camp?

Thieu Well we tried to make people unhappy tried something like that

Martha So you volunteered to give them water and all of that?

Thieu Yes we also had some music nigh or something like that to make them happy

Martha Was there any hard labor?

Thieu Yes they do have it

Martha That's very emotional

Thieu Yes a lot of stories about that

Martha Like? Can you give me a story?

Thieu It is in the camp and then 1980 until now I talk to you about that and why I wrote six books. Since 1987 I start writing first three books about science, I think that my people lost at least 15 or 20 years when they come over here they don't know English so they lost their knowledge only working, working, working they don't know what's going on around them they don't know what happen about the science because I am professor at University. When I graduate from the University of Florida we do literature review so I do literature review for 25 years about science everything happen a quarter of a century that's the time they lost about 25 years during the war from 75 to 90 so about 25 years they lost that time they lost their time so I review (undistinguishable) literature review so people appreciate me with this one. I review everyday of science and space science something everything of environment to help people understand it what's going on around you
[Phone rings]

People after three books they are so appreciative and then since 1995 I think this one, now they have jobs their families are stable they can understand about the science they can read a little bit because they know a little bit so I stop literature review about science. I do reviews for writers for the whole world Asia, Africa, America, South America everything and this (pointing to his book) is international literature you see look right here (opening book) this book has 20 short stories

[Phone rings]

From 22 different countries from the whole world so I review, literature review, international literature for them people appreciate again that what I am doing, I do something different

Martha So are you going to continue another book?
Thieu Yes I think now I continue
Martha Do you want to write another book?
Thieu Yes
Martha How many more would you say you are going to write?
Thieu I want to write one book about science review for the last 15 years and about 2 books about international literature, what do you think?
Martha That's great
Thieu That's wonderful?
Martha Yes
Thieu You like that?
Martha Yes. [Pause] When you were in the camp where you require a health inspection?

Track 1- 20:02

Thieu No, we don't have health inspections we have a small clinic in refugee camp some refugee doctor they have that's it
Martha They didn't give you shots or anything?
Thieu Yes and bring people there and give them medicine and that's it and we do have a Catholic church a Baptist church and a Buddhist temple
Martha So something for everybody
Thieu Yes
Martha When you moved to the US was it hard to start a new life?
Thieu I start over
Martha Fresh?
Thieu Fresh [pause] at the University of Florida I studied biochemistry and come back to Vietnam I was from 1975 to 1980 I taught at University of Saigon in biochemistry and then come over here in 1981 and new person fresh person I don't want anything relate to biochemistry anymore and I do social work
Martha Why is that?

Track 1- 21:22

Thieu Because in the camp I was Chairman I helped a lot of people and I understand how the people suffered and I see the suffering of the people and I thought that why people still suffering and why I am so peaceful or so calm or so something in library in school quiet a small area like that look like a doctor only four walls that's it and I don't want I want to go out to help the people and the one touched me a lot, let me tell you the true story that touched me a lot. The night before I go back to Vietnam in December 1974 I had a dream a big dream that dream changed my whole life I dreamed in that dream I was in the middle of the village in Vietnam all the houses were destroyed by a bomb by the war and all the people in the village were dying only one church in the middle of the village and the cross that's it and I standing there and someone touched me in my shoulder and I looked in my back and I see a priest and he told me that listen all the people here are dying so he told me that now you and me collect the people all the corpse of the people and to bury them and we do that and we find all the people that are lying there and we bury them and then he told me that well we do it now we try to rebuilt the village and the

priest and me we plant surrounding the village and we do that and the entrance to the village we make it look like a gate and above the gate we write The Willow Village because we plant all the willows around the village and when I go back to for 5 years I taught in the University of Saigon that dream always in my mind and then when I escaped from Vietnam in 1980 and worked as a Chairman in the camp I see a lot of people suffering and it relate to my dream so I don't work anymore I don't want to work in the science anymore it changed my life in my inside someone talk to me to go out and help people not in classroom not in laboratory not in the library not in the clinic nothing but go out and help people that's my dream that affect me a lot very emotional that's the truth that I tell you the truth that dream changed my whole life

Track 1- 25:45

Martha So right now do you work with people?

Thieu Yes I work with people at work for the city of Houston as Senior Committee Liaison and work for helping people to help people how to adapt with a new life and if they need something if need help from the police, health department from everything they call me I do help and I feel that my life is so rich, how do you like that?

Martha I like that very much that's really incredible [Pause] so when you got here did you find a job right away or how did you get by?

Thieu For a few years I worked different job I worked for an agency called International Community Service it helped people to it helped everybody with medical and at that time we still had (undistinguishable)

Martha So right now where you live what are the differences between your community back in Vietnam and here?

Thieu The difference here and Vietnam? Quite different, like my brother here just come here to visit me from [country], very quiet different, and I always tell him here that we work hard and we get something to eat and have a house to live but in Vietnam we work hard and we get nothing that's the difference

Martha That's very different

Thieu Very different we work hard you have a house you have food here in Vietnam you work hard and we don't have food enough to eat for yourself or your family, quite different
[Pause]

Martha Do you think of yourself now as an American as a "Texan" because you live here in Texas or not?

Thieu Sometime I feel like when I go back to Vietnam I feel that I am stranger because everything is so different right now so this is my country

Martha Are you a citizen?

Thieu Yes long time ago since 1986

[Translator: He is a real American now. Thieu laughs]

Martha So do you keep in touch with any relatives back in Vietnam?

Thieu Sure

Martha Do you call them? Write to them?

Thieu I call them and I visit Vietnam two times already to visit my brother and sister I still have six in Vietnam, three brother, three sister in Vietnam, my parents die in Vietnam

Martha Do any of your brothers live here?

Thieu Yes two, you know that's amazing we moved to the South, three of us, and now we move to the States, three of us, and left six persons in North Vietnam and now six people are in Vietnam that's amazing [Laughs]

Martha Do you really like going back to visit?

Track 1- 30:01

Thieu Somehow I visit my country and visit my relatives I visit my village

Martha So since some brothers are over there and you are over here how do you celebrate holidays like New Year's?

Thieu Well we celebrate here they celebrate in Vietnam we celebrate here

Martha You guys don't go and celebrate?

Thieu No, you know that during the holiday a lot of people come by so a lot of trouble by so I don't like that

Martha Can you name a song that reminds you of Vietnam?

Thieu A lot

Martha Just one

Thieu [Laughs] Vietnamese spoken: name of song
[Translator; L-e-d-a]

Thieu That means why stone have tears. One word in that song is: how do you know the stones have no tears [Laughs]

Martha [Laugh] [Pause] so in your opinion what would Vietnamese culture become in the US?

[Translator]

[Phone rings]

Thieu We try to maintain the Vietnamese culture in here because we know that generations later when they growing up we try to let know we have our own culture that what I proposed try to maintain the culture like Japanese, Chinese they try to maintain their rule so we try to maintain our rule

Martha Is it important to keep you culture identity?

Thieu Sure, to make sure next generation know where they are from why they are here so we try to keep that in our culture

Martha Are there any memories you would like to share with me?

Thieu A lot, memories about the past the..

Martha Give me one of the past

Thieu In Vietnam

Martha Yes

Track 1- 33:00

Thieu Remember when I go back to Vietnam in December 1974 and the communist took over in April 1975 at that time I was professor at the University of Saigon but they still keeping me to teach at the University of Saigon. We wonder why I don't get send to re-education camp, now understand they used

me as a flower, during that time a lot of delegation from all the countries like Asia or even the Russian to come to visit my University, University of Saigon. The day before they come to delegation before they come to visit the leader of the communist they told me “Hi comrade, tomorrow we have delegation for Malaysia, for example, to come visit our University, please have shoe on have a tie have a coat” but you remember that time nobody wear shoe only sandal and shirt put outside the pants but they asked me to have tie, shoe, and coat, and he continued telling me “Remember [pause] they are intelligent but we have a lot of people much more intelligent than them, so I ask you don’t talk anything only sit, don’t talk anything only smile and sit there.” So the next day the delegation come and everyone sit around the table I was one of the people sitting in the table with my coat neck tie and shoe and only smile and they used me as a flower and they introduced me “Dr.Dang, he graduate form United States we still use them you see” like flower cannot talk a word they don’t like me talk a word only smile.

Track 1- 36:07

Martha Did you have that attire?

Thieu Yeah I just come back from the States I still had it

Martha Do you want to share another memory with me?

Thieu [Laughs] ok, Do you remember that I explained to you that they (undistinguishable) to hate America hate the people that graduate in the United States, something like that, so they used me as a flower for propaganda, see we still use people from right there they are well dressed and they like that, that’s a propaganda.

Martha You have another one?

Thieu From here

Martha Yes

Thieu Last week, I work for the city of Houston, last week a man knocked in my office and he introduced me his name he asked me “do you remember me?” I said no I don’t remember you, he said I still remember you about more than 20 years ago I still remember you. I asked him how why he said that in 1983 at that time he came from refugee camp and come to your office for help to translate some document to work at metro at that time you helped me a lot and I appreciate that and today I come to you about 24 years later and ask you to help me again that’s my memory before I come here in 1990 we (undistinguishable) and the work I work here in 1980 until now.

Martha So you like your life right now here? You have a wife and a family?

Thieu Yes my wife out there (pointing to her outside of room)

Martha How many kids do you have?

Thieu I have four, they graduate all, one work at UT Houston to do research, one Pharmacist, they come here in 1990, and one working on CPA and one is a BA in Finance

Martha Your family that was left in Vietnam did they come to the United States?

Thieu Yes I sponsor them for 10 years

Martha Alright well that's all the questions I have
Thieu Very rich
Martha Yes
Thieu If I die tomorrow I am happy because my life is so rich I moved from North to South when I was 10 years old and then come here to study and going back and move here and my life so rich

Track 1- 40:12

Martha I hope one day I can say the same

Thieu You enjoy the stories

Martha Yes

Thieu Alright

Martha Thank you very much

End total time Track 1- 40:30

Summary

Subject: Life Changing Dream/Experience

Track 1- 21:22

Thieu The night before I go back to Vietnam in December 1974 I had a big dream that dream changed my whole life. I was in the middle of the village in Vietnam all the houses were destroyed by a bomb by the war and all the people in the village were dying only one church in the middle of the village. I standing there and someone touched me in my shoulder and I looked back and I see a priest and he told me...listen all the people here are dying so... now you and me collect the corpse of the people and to bury them ...we try to rebuilt the village and the priest and me we plant surrounding the village and we do that, and the entrance to the village ...we write The Willow Village because we plant all the willows around the village and when I go back for 5 years I taught in the University of Saigon, that dream always in my mind and then when I escaped from Vietnam in 1980 and worked as a Chairman in the camp I see a lot of people suffering and it relate to my dream so...I don't want to work in the science anymore it changed my life in my inside someone talk to me to go out and help people not in classroom not in laboratory not in the library not in the clinic nothing but go out and help people...very emotional that's the truth that I tell you the truth that dream changed my whole life.

I feel that this is what represents him and his life. His experiences shaped how he looked at life and his dream just confirmed what he needed to do in his existence. I kept the his own words because that is him, one represents himself/herself by the way they speak, I would lose him and the sense of his story if I were to change his words and correct it all. I want to be able to keep the message he is trying to convey if I change it them maybe I can interpret the story differently and I want people to feel what he was felling when his dream was going on and how it effected the rest of his life.
