

Name of Interviewer: Joy Bernardo

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Language of Interview: English

Location of the Interview: Perry Castaneda Library on UT Campus, Speedway & 21st

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Themes: Immigration; Father's legacy; Nguyen Dynasty

Name of Person Interviewed (or pseudonym): Michele Tran

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Name	Transcript
Joy	This is Joy Bernardo interviewing Michele Tran. So I saw you write that you had come to America around the age of 10?
Michele	Correct.
Joy	How was it growing up in America?
Michele	I was actually in the sixth grade, doing the normal kid thing when my parents asked us to pack a small travel bag to get ready for a trip. At that time, you know, we didn't know that their plan was to bring us to the United States.
Joy	What was life like as a child in Vietnam?
Michele	What was life like as a child in Vietnam? My father was in the air force, so my years in Vietnam were spent going, or living at the different bases with my dad. So I would say that if I were to compare my childhood with a 10-year old in the US, it was a lot different. I saw fighter planes went on missions. I saw planes come back from their bombing missions. I saw fighter planes crashed at the base, and because of the height of the war at that time, I think I was more aware of the political aspects than a regular 10-year old in the US.
Joy	Was your father involved in any of this? Was he a soldier?
Michele	My father was in the Vietnamese air force, a high rank officer who worked close with the US air force, who at that time basically they trained him and he offered all the help of the operations of the Vietnamese air force. He was not a polite, but he was more on the logistics side of maintaining the planes, the technical side.
Joy	Can you explain a typical daily or a typical routine in Vietnam as a child?

Michele Ok a typical day was basically, I woke up, ate breakfast, got ready for school. Because we lived in the air base, we couldn't walk to school or ride our bikes to school, but we had one of my father's chauffeur who would to us to the base to the public school, or whenever we went to private school, sometimes outside the base. And for security reasons each air force family has our own badges, so we when we go through the gate, we have to present our own badge. Then we spent the whole day at school, one thing I do know was that, you see my parents were known as the more educated Vietnamese, so in Vietnam their goal was to prepare us, so that when we finish high school we would go to college or go abroad. Even in our early childhood, education was very important, so we were always at some prep school.

Joy Okay. So for the prep school, was this for public or for private school?

Michele The preparatory schools were mostly private schools. The Vietnamese public schools, which at that time my mom taught at the public schools, but none of our siblings attended public school. The private schools were run by foreigners, either English or American. For me, I attended a French school. Other than Vietnamese, I read and write better in French than Vietnamese.

Joy So what were the main differences between the French and American schools as opposed to, I guess the Vietnamese schools?

Michele Well I think mainly the curriculum between the foreign run French and school and the Vietnamese run schools was how much foreign language was taught. Basically all the French schools I attended, all the subjects were taught in French. Vietnamese was a foreign language. You know, I took Vietnamese as a foreign language class and the main subjects were taught in French. Vietnamese was taught as a second language. And same with teachers, if it were a French school, then most of the teachers were French. You know English schools, most of the teachers were from England, Australia, or America.

Joy Oh. Were you involved in any cultural organizations?

Michele Well at the school there's many organizations you can be part of. So since I went to a French school, I belonged to this French Culture...club. We do activities for the kids. Basically we went to the library outside these hours to work through the culture club. The school day was basically just the academic class.

Joy Okay. So how long was a school day? What time did you start and what time did you finish?

Michele School days, were a little bit different because there were morning classes and afternoon classes with a break. I want to say 2 to 3 hour break in the middle of the day. So we would be dismissed and we would come back for the afternoon classes at two o'clock or in the afternoon.

Joy Okay. Alright well I'm going to ask you some questions over the war. So do you remember the war vividly? Or if you were too young, maybe your parents talked about it?

Michele About the Vietnam war, I think my main experience or what I remember is that my father would have coworkers in the air force, also from discussion from my uncles in the air force with my father and when they talked about what happened or what had occurred. As far as first hand experience, you know like I said because we lived in the base, we saw planes preparing for their mission, we saw planes coming back from their missions. Then whenever my father would warn us that there's a mission coming up and we would have to hide for safety.

Joy Okay. You said you have siblings, are they older or younger.

Michele I have one younger sister and one younger brother. I am the oldest. My sister is a couple years younger than me and my brother is five years younger than me.

Joy So do you think they knew what was going on in the war or were y'all all confused about it?

Michele We were... my siblings were too young and were kind of adapting to moving around a lot. When we came to the states that's when we learned a lot of the war and the history of the war, once we're here in the states.

Joy Did you have to move around a lot during the war? I know that on your paper you put that you're from Saigon.

Michele The last place where we lives before we left Vietnam was in Saigon, but I basically, you know my dad was stationed in different bases- Central Vietnam, South Vietnam, all the way down to the south tip of Vietnam. I was ten and I remember being in at least five different air bases.

Joy How was adjusting to different schools? Did you have to make new friends- I guess?

Michele Adjusting during that time was not really hard. It was a little hard to keep changing schools. With my mom, it was very important that we were at a private French school and sometimes it was hard to find living at the air force base.

Joy Okay. How did the war affect you and your family, I guess overall? Either during the war or even after the war?

Michele Yeah well okay, let's see. When we talk about the big picture, I think it has a tremendous affect on the life of the Vietnamese. For our family in specific, even after we left Vietnam and came to the states, it was the aftermath that affected my father a lot. Because he was an officer in the air force and after '75 basically..this is my point of view, this is not anything official, this is my point view...I think it affected him greatly because someone who was in high position suddenly got stripped of all the power. It was hard for him. Being a...he was... I think he was a lieutenant colonel to after coming to the states and working as a mechanic at John Deere. That was a very big negative adjustment for him. Psychologically it affected his life. He was, I think in the mid 40s when we left and truly this interview, I told Linda earlier that I wanted- I agreed to do this interview to elaborate on my father's history. He came from a family that basically had a strong hold in the Vietnamese government politics. Even before the days of the war, we are direct descendants of the Nguyen Dynasty. Ok so he was always into politics. So when we came here to the states, it was very hard for him. I have to say that it's hard for everybody else too, but being his daughter, and my observation, you know it's tough because halfway through his life he has to start over. And all of that, because of that it affected the way we were raised in our teenage years- the cultural differences and the status. Even though over here we always talk about, "ok equal opportunity for everybody." You gotta start somewhere. So starting at age 45 is much different and much harder than someone who starts off after college.

Joy Did he ever talk about the war to you or your siblings? Was it just kind of an unmentioned topic?

Michele It was an unmentioned topic until I was in college. Until we were older, and same thing with my siblings, until we're older. When we study about history or about government and involvement about the government in South East Asia- so in those times, yeah, he talked more about it to us about his point of views about whose

fault it was and all of that, but normally day-to-day, they don't discuss it. He has a lot of air force friends that, they get together and reminisce about all those things, but not to us.

Joy Do you know if your mom had a different perspective? Did she talk of any of it?

Michele My mom, yeah, they really are different in their point of views. Basically my mom came over here, and to her, it was an opportunity for her to excel. It was tough for her because, again, our background, and my mother's background was French. So she was educated through French schools, she talked French, that's her career. She didn't speak English, but she saw us here as a new opportunity for her to excel. She did really well, she went back to school. She got a graduate degree and this talking about the war, or talking about what's left behind, I'm sure it was painful. She doesn't want to talk about it. I think she was very strong, looked forward and moved forward. That was her personality. For the kids, it was a balance because my dad struggled in the new country. Even though he worked with Americans all his life, but when we came over here, for him it was a step back, but for my mom it was the other way.

Joy You had mentioned that y'all were the descendents from the Nguyen dynasty? Can you explain that more?

Michele Okay the background was that, see, actually it's a funny story. This summer, we went back to Vietnam and all of a sudden we found out that we had hundreds of cousins. I was like "Who are these people? Where are they from? Why are we related?" But okay, my great grandfather is...was one of the kings in Vietnam. So he was like...actually I have a book...I forgot about the book (takes book out and flips pages). I'm looking through. Okay when did he rule? Okay, he ruled from 1889 to 1907 and, so my, and I think he passed away maybe in the late 1940s. But he was one of the emperor, and he had, I don't know, my grandfather was the son of his...one of his many wives. I want to say thirteen, but so you know, all of a sudden. You know we didn't know because we grew up here in the states, but we didn't know we had so many relatives. It's kind of a new and big discovery for us.

Joy So you just recently found out?

Michele No, well we knew that we're descendants, but we didn't know that there were all these people living, so my father had introduced me to his cousins here in the states, but there were a lot more back in

soon as they released him, he tried and planned his escape right away.

Joy Was he able to go to America right away?

Michele So he got caught and went back to jail for about 3 years and then after he was released, finally the HO program came...the Humanitarian Orderly Departure. That's how he left. I don't remember when it was, mid 80s.

Joy And that's how he came?

Michele He came to the US.

Joy Did he live with y'all?

Michele No, now he lives in California.

Joy Okay, and was it difficult for him to be a citizen?

Michele Right, basically when he came here his siblings sponsored him here. So as far as, financially, we, his family, his siblings were his support. We provided the financial support, but I mean again, yes, it was hard for all these men and women who have to start over in there 30s and 40s. He worked during his labor job and go back to school. His first four or five years were probably the hardest because I can't speak for him, but education was very important. So as soon as they came here, it was like priority one. As far as making money, they'll do whatever to survive, but their priority was to get some sort of degree. I think that's how I was taught. Even if you lose everything, you need to be educated and you won't lose that. You know?

Joy Right. Going back to when you came here, I know you said that you were 10 years old. You had mentioned your parents told you to pack and everything, why did y'all decide that time and why did y'all migrate here.

Michele Okay. The decision to leave was from my dad because he was in the airforce and they were authorized to evacuate the family because all the officers, like my father, they had to stay, but they had authorization to evacuate the family out of Vietnam. So that's how my parents decided, ok, my mom would take the children and whenever it was time to leave and they told us to pack. We didn't know at that time on what day or what date, but we knew were gonna go somewhere. It was just gonna be my mother and us and

she said that we would need small bags that we could just take ourselves and carry ourself. I remember they told us “Make sure you bring some books, make sure you pack a couple change of clothes, and if we have extra room, we can pack whatever we want.” But she said to pack some books.

Joy So how did y’all get here? Did y’all board a plane? Or was there a different means of transportation?

Michele We came by plane. We left Vietnam on like the morning of April 30th. We were one of the last three planes that took off from the air base in Saigon. That morning of the 30th was when the Communists came into Saigon. Later on that morning, I think like 9 o’clock in the morning, our plane took off right before 5. When we left, my brother he was maybe 5 around the time, he looked out on the window of the plane and the plane was full of women and children because they’re families of these officers so of course all the mothers were sobbing and they knew they didn’t know when they were gonna come back. The rest of the families were all left behind so of course the adults were very upset and sad. The children were exhausted. My brother, he looked out of the window and he saw flashes of light hitting in the sky and he said “What celebration is it? Why are there so many fireworks?” And it was the bombing of Saigon, or the outskirts of Saigon. But to the eye of a 5 year old, they think it’s fireworks. It was a bitter moment and I don’t think really no one explained to him until he was pretty grown up. When we talked to him about it we said, “that’s what happened on that morning,” and he thought it was fireworks.

Joy Did you know it was bombing at the time?

Michele Yes because you hear on the news and on the broadcast that there is bombing around the city and so after we left Vietnam, our plane, we went to Manila, Philippines. So when we were in Manila, that morning, that’s when we heard the new that the communist had taken over the government

Joy So when were y’all reunited with your dad?

Michele Ok so we went to Manila, then from Manila they processed all the immigration paperwork and I guess they did all the health exams before they put us in another flight to Guam because Guam was where all the refugee camps were set up. So we went from Manila to Guam. We stayed in Guam for several week, I dunno, 3 or 4 weeks until my dad showed up.

Joy So it was only a few weeks?

Michele Right because he left I think the day after or the day of by boat, but he went out to sea so it took him a few weeks.

Joy So you said that in Guam you were in the refugee camp?

Michele It was camp, it was intense. They were these big military camps and they put cots under the tents and I wanna say about 20 people in each tent. They gave us these storage bags, they look like duffel bags for us to keep our belongings in their. Luckily during that time, the weather was good and so we would roll up the side of the tents and at night we would pull it down. At that time, we didn't know any better.

Joy What was the normal routine in the camp? What did y'all do to keep yourselves busy?

Michele Well they set up, the first few days, we had to do paperwork. You also had to declare, you know like my father...how we got there, what connections we had so that they could help locate my father, or that they could locate all the fathers. At that time, there were mostly families at the camp. When we got there, they had to help us locate all the fathers. Then they had some activities for the kids to do during the daytime, but there wasn't really much.

Joy So when you did come to the US, how was that like? Obviously a big change, but do you regret living here? Obviously this is a good opportunity like what your mom said.

Michele Yeah it was very different when we arrived to the mainland because, yeah, we just weren't...it's not like we had some sort of preparation, or some sort of class to what to expect and on top of that we didn't speak the language. It was very different. We had a very supportive family that sponsored our family, and that family was one of my father's air force friends when he trained here in Lubbock. So they sponsored our family. We lived in their home for the first several weeks until we got our own place. For me as a kid, I didn't speak English at that time so it was hard. But my French background helped out a whole lot. I came to Lubbock in June and school started in August. I was able to start school, of course I didn't understand everything that was going on

Joy Was it difficult finding a job?- either before college, during college, or maybe even after college?

Michele No not for me, I think when we went through college, everything was pretty much normal. I think it was hard for my parents when we first arrived here. The same thing...they didn't speak the language, they didn't drive. Living in Texas where everybody drives, you need that transportation.

Joy Can you compare your children's lifestyle with...or as opposed to how you were living as a child?

Michele I think my children's lifestyle, comparing it to mine or my siblings, yeah, are totally different. If somebody from Vietnam looking in, they would say my kids are spoiled brats. (laughter) I don't have better words to say, and I do. I spoil them. I give them everything that they want, in fact, I don't. They have limited hours that they can watch TV. They only get to play video games as a reward, but I do go out of my way to provide them things that I didn't have when I was little. My uncles that come over here say, "What's wrong with just having them just stay at home? We did it when we were younger?" And I say "Yeah, when we were younger. We were like 8 or 9 years old and we'd stay at home alone." And they say, "Why do they have to have someone there? Why did you have to get off work and take them to all these lessons? Why do you have to constantly shuttle them around to these activities?" But I didn't have that when I grew up and I think it's very important that they do all that now. I can speak for my friends who have children who are teenagers, we want our kids to be like any other American kid.