

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Thieu Dang
Interviewers: Amber Lu, Kelly Dong
Date/Time of Interview: October 26, 2018
Transcribed by: Amber Lu, Kelly Dong
Audio Track Time: 1:07:28
Edited by: Mary Claire Neal (3/5/2019)

Background: Thieu Dang was born in Nam Định, Vietnam. As a child, he moved to Saigon, South Vietnam to live with his aunt and uncle amidst conflicts the First Indochina War and later on the Vietnam War. Dr. Dang studied agriculture at both the University of Saigon and the University of Florida and later became a professor at the University of Saigon. He eventually fled Vietnam as a refugee, living in a refugee camp in Galang, Indonesia before settling in the United States. Dr. Dang worked in law enforcement with both the Houston Police Department and the FBI.

Setting: The interview took place on October 26, 2018 at the Digital Media Commons in Fondren Library. Dr. Dang brought with him a poster and copy of a documentary that he been involved in about a Vietnamese perspective on the Vietnamese refugee crisis, *Vietnamerica*. The interview focused on the events detailed in a short autobiography that Dr. Dang had provided, including information about his life in Vietnam and the US and his work with the Houston Asian-American community.

Key:

TD: Thieu Dang
AL: Amber Lu
KD: Kelly Dong
--: speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...: speech trails off, pause
Italics: emphasis
[Brackets]: Actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]

Transcript:

AL: Okay, so today is October 26th, 2018. I'm here with Dr. Thieu Dang. My name is Amber Lu, and...

KD: Kelly Dong.

TD: Good afternoon, Amber and uh, Kelly, yeah. My name is Thieu Dang. Thieu Dang, uh huh.

AL: So, can you tell us a little bit about your early life. Where you were born, and a little bit about your family?

TD: Okay [mic noise]. I was born in, uh, Nam Định, a small town, uh, in, uh, North Vietnam. Uh, it was about ninety kilometers far from, uh, Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam. Uh, I have five brothers and sisters, and, uh, my father is, uh, a government employee, uh, for the c-city of Nam Định, my mother is, uh, a small businesswoman. Mm-hmm. She have a small store.

AL: What did she sell at her store?

TD: Uh, grocery store. Everything. [**AL:** laughs] Yeah, everything.

AL: I see. So can you tell us a little bit about like your experiences from childhood?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

TD: Uh-huh.

AL: Something memorable?

TD: Uh, I remember, uh, that my family's, uh, was in a small village about ten kilometers far from Nam Định. Uh, in 1946 or '47, we go off to war, my family have to move to the city of, uh, Nam Định. So, uh, at that time, the war between, uh, Viet Ming and French, it become more and more intensive, so my family have to move [**AL:** mhm]. And, uh, when I was, at uh, in Nam Định, I attend elementary school in the Catholic school, so-called St. Joseph's Catholic Elementary School.

AL: So, are you Catholic, or...?

TD: No, I'm Buddhist. [**AL:** mhm] Mhm, mhm.

AL: But, so, when you were in Catholic school, did they make you do prayers or other—

TD: Yes. And – uh, I do prayer every morning before school [**AL:** I see], before class begin.

AL: Mm-hmm. So eventually your father sent you to South Vietnam while the rest of your family stayed in North Vietnam, right?

TD: Yes. Yeah, this a long story, you know? [**AL:** mhm] Uh, in 1954, uh, the fight between, uh, uh, Viet Ming and French become intensive, and, uh, the French lose the battlefield in Dien Bien Phu [**AL:** mhm] and, uh, both side, uh, sign an, uh, so-called Geneva Accord, and, uh, the Vietnam divide into two. So, the North belong to the Communist regime, and the South is a democratic, uh, government. And at that time, my father and people in the North or in the South don't know anything about the Communism [**AL:** mhm]. Ho Chi Minh say that they are nationalists, so we are very confused. We don't know what to do [**AL:** mhm]. And, uh, according to the, the-the Geneva Accord, uh, the country divide into two, North and South, and, uh, they have, uh, a general election two year later. So-

AL: In the North? Or the South?

TD: No, two – the North and South. The whole country will have an election [**AL:** Oh, okay.] in two years. So, my father decided to, uh, send me to the South [**AL:** mhm], and the rest of the family stay in the North.

AL: So, why was it just you, why not send you know, your brothers down south as well?

TD: Uh, yeah, two my, my younger brothers and sisters is too young. But my older brother, you know, the Asian family, they need the eldest son to live with them, but, so my parents chose me, send me to the South.

AL: So, where did you go in South Vietnam? What cities did you live in?

TD: Saigon, yeah. I went to Saigon with uh my, uh, friend of my, uh, father. Go with them. And then I live with my uncle there. This uncle, that mean brother of my father, in there.

AL: So, what was the difference between living in like, North Vietnam versus living in South Vietnam?

TD: Well, the difference between – let me say the difference between Nam Định, Hanoi, and Saigon. Nam Định is a very small city, very peaceful. And Hanoi is, a very ancient city, old city. Uh, but we – it have a beautiful lake, so-called Returned Lake, that's a very beautiful one. Quiet, uh, old city, uh, people

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is quiet, very elegant. But Saigon is more Westernized, uh, it have, uh, high building, a lot of car, and something like that. Uh, people very busy, that's the difference between the three cities.

AL: I see.

TD: Uh huh.

AL: Do you think the, that South Vietnam was more Westernized because of the French?

TD: Yes. It belonged to French, uh, colony.

AL: Mm-hmm, I see. So, the fight between the French and the Vietnamese Communists, did that impact your daily life a lot, other than moving?

TD: Uh, before, uh, young – what?

AL: Yeah, when you were young.

TD: When I was young. Yes, it affect me a lot. It affect me a lot. That's the reason when in my early time, because of the war [**AL:** mhm], I have to move to the South, to Saigon. It affect me a lot. To my future, everything. To find my family, to my future, and everything.

AL: Uh, I mean more like, like your everyday life, like when you were in, when you were in school, when you just like –

TD: In the South?

AL: Mhm.

TD: Yeah. It affect me a lot. [**AL:** Mm-hmm yeah.] But, but it affect me especially, um, about, uh, about the last two years of high school and uh, during the – my college life. It affect me a lot because at that time, the war is become more and more intensive, and, uh a lot more people was, uh, mobilized and, uh – so-called, what is said? – um, uh, drafted, yeah. So a lot of young was drafted, and a lot of young would die or wounded. So, we worry a lot. It affect me a lot.

AL: So, you knew people who were drafted into the army, or who fought in the war. [**TD:** (nods)] I see.

TD: Yeah.

AL: Mhm. So, what did you – so you went eventually went on to go to college, right? So ? what did you study when you were in college?

TD: Yeah. It's different from here in Vietnam. At that time, we have to pass an exam. I choose, uh, College of Agriculture, University of Saigon, and to take an exam about one thousand students enrolled for the exam. And they take about fifty or sixty, something like that. Very difficult. Uh, I get into the, that college, College of Agriculture. The reason why I choose that because [clears throat] you know, Vietnam is a agricultural country – about 80% of the income of the country is belong to agriculture. Uh, a lot of people was villager and they live with the agriculture cultivation.

AL: I see. So, when you were in college, there was still the war and there was still fighting?

TD: It is fight a lot, yeah and, uh, it is, that is, uh, in, uh, '61 – '61, until more and more, you know.

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

AL: Yeah, so did you – were you able to, like, keep in touch with friends or family who were really close to the war or who were fighting in the war?

TD: Uh, you mean that, uh, can talk with my family in the North?

AL: Yeah.

TD: No. [**AL:** No?] They don't let us to do that. We don't allowed. During the time I lived in the South Vietnam, I could not hear anything from my family in the North.

AL: I see. So, what kind of things did you like, did you have a lot of free time in college, did you do a lot of fun things?

TD: What is – uh, in the college? [**AL:** Yeah.] Fun things? No, no, no, no not at all. I only enjoy with my classmate and uh, study and study. That's it. [**AL:** I see.] Study and study. [**AL:** laughs] Yeah.

AL: So, while you were in college, the Tet Offensive happened, right?

TD: Yeah, it is in uh January 1968. Yeah. No, at that time, I was uh, I graduated in 1964. [**AL:** Ah, okay.] And, uh, since 1964 to '69, I was an instructor at the University of Saigon, and, uh, during the Tet Offensive, January 1968, I was, I am teaching at University of Saigon already.

AL: So, did that – how did that impact you?

TD: Well, that's a very sad, you know, very sad [clears throat]. Let me tell you that the, during Tet, that is New Year. The both side look like the – the – the Viet Cong and, uh, South Vietnamese government, they make agreement that is ceasefire for three days and let the people enjoy the new year. To pray to ancestors, something like that. Uh, but the North Vietnamese break the agreement. They attack everywhere in the South Vietnam. So, they break the law; they break the agreement. So, people condemn about that. And they kill a lot of people – thousand, thousand innocent persons on that offense. Yeah, mmm.

AL: Yeah. So, but at that time you wouldn't know if your family in North Vietnam was safe. What about in South Vietnam? Did--

TD: We don't know; I know nothing about the North, the family in Vietnam. But in South Vietnam, we are so worried [**AL:** mhm] because uh, every know that after the Tet Offensive, uh, the government, uh, will increase the number of soldier [**AL:** mhm] in the battlefield, so a lot of, uh, young people [**AL:** mhm] will be drafted. [**AL:** I see.] So everybody worried, every boy worried. And, you know that every day, uh, the Viet Cong – I live in Saigon [**AL:** mhm], and uh, the suburb of Saigon, there are a lot of Viet Cong. They attack by, uh, get some cannon to c-- the city. Every year, we heard a lot of bombing, bombing like that. So that's terrible [**AL:** mhm]. And every day, the news from friend of mine, they say, uh, sad that uh, someone was killed, some friend of mine was killed, friend of mine was wounded [**AL:** mhm]. That's a sad news, sad news [**AL:** mhm], that's very bad, you know, situation at that time.

AL: Mhm. So, while all of this was going on, you decided to get married, right?

TD: No [coughs] at that time, I'm not. I have no idea about get married. Even though, at that time, uh, 26 or 27 years old. But, my uncle and my aunt, they are worried for me [**AL:** mhm]. They say sooner or later I will be drafted, so, uh, you know, the Asian, they want – you know, my uncle considered me like uh, his uh, own son, so he want to have a grandson, something like that. So, they pushed me to get married, you know? So, because I love my uncle and my aunt, so I say, okay, get married and let them uh, happy.

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AL: Ok so, can you t-- so, after you got married, um can you tell us a little bit about your wife and children?

TD: Uh, well – my wife, she is a lovely lady. She is, uh, two years younger than me, and, uh, uh, after that, I get married, uh, about a year later. I have a child, a son, and then, and then uh, and then after that, before I went to, uh, to – to, uh, the US, and then, she told me that she got pregnant, and uh, might be get one more child, and so happy about that.

AL: So, you mentioned coming to the US. Um, that was to come study, right?

TD: Mm-hmm.

AL: So, can you tell us a little bit about why you decided to come to America to study.

TD: Yeah. [Coughs] I – I like the government, the South Vietnamese government, because during that war, they still think about the future of the country. So, the South Vietnamese government and the US government, uh, have a plan to select some youth to go to the US for higher education. So, and, so I was so lucky to be selected, one of them. Uh, not too many, uh, go to the US at that time – a year, about five, six, or seven people couldn't – could go. So, I'm so happy and so lucky, you know?

AL: So, what did you study there?

TD: Well, I chose uh, biochemistry and, uh, nutrition. Yeah, that's, uh, you know, at that time in Vietnam, we don't have much in that field; not too many study in that field, so I chose that.

AL: Mm-hmm. So, while you were in college at the, in the US, how was that different than being a college student in Vietnam?

TD: Yeah, it's quite different. It is quite different. [clears throat] In Vietnam, we have to study by heart. Memorize everything the professor say. We don't have too many books; we don't have many books for references, no. Only what the teacher, what the professor say, we have to, uh, memorize it. That's it. And, here, you see, you study here, we have a lot of books, uh, so, it is quite different between school in Vietnam and school in US.

AL: So, which one did you like more? Did you like studying in Vietnam or did you like studying in America?

TD: Uh, of course, uh, at that time, I was uh, I live in campus of University of Florida, so I don't know much about the city. But, anyhow, I go around, you know? But, uh, it's, uh, for sure the city in US is much better than in Vietnam. Vietnam at that time is at war, everything is terrifying, you know? We don't have enough – *everything!* We don't have enough everything. And people worry and worry and worry about the war. [clears throat]

AL: So, since you were on college- since you were at- in college at the time, like, what do you think Americans thought about the Vietnam War?

TD: [Coughs] I can say that American is so naïve. Very naïve, you know? They only think – they, they believe in what the media say. And, uh, I lived in here from 1969 to '75, and I know, and I see that what, uh, Mr. Walter Cronkite of CBS say on the television every day – I watch him every day – and, uh, I think that, uh, what they say in the television is quite different from my experience in Vietnam. And, uh, they take bias, only talk good about the North Vietnam and bad about South Vietnam. They don't – he doesn't understand that, or I think he understand that, but he ignore it. He's biased, yeah. So, we make a

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

film *Vietnamerica* here to tell the truth. To tell the truth. What the Vietnamese – what the truth about Vietnam War, mm-hmm.

AL: So, you feel like the Americans were too naïve to understand what was going on in Vietnam?

TD: Yeah, I say that the, they are naïve. They only believe what the media say. Ok look like, uh, when picture of a general killed, when, uh, Viet Cong, you know, that's a famous picture. [**AL:** mhm] But, the other side of the picture, the whole story is different. Because that Viet Cong is killed the whole family of his friend, is a colonel. The, that Viet Cong killed the whole family and then ran, but he was seized by a soldier bring him to the general and tell the story that he killed the – the – the major, his major already. The whole family and many people already. And that general so angry, and uh, you know at that time, at the battlefield, so you think what happened? That is the whole story. And, the only – the the thing that they only see the picture, the general killed one man. That's it, unhuman. No, in the battlefield, it's different.

AL: So, did you keep in touch with your family in South Vietnam while you were in America?

TD: Sure, sure. I wrote letter frequently and asked my wife about my two children, my uncle, and my aunt every – almost every week.

AL: I see. So, you kept in touch with how it was going on in Vietnam, and you knew it was different than what the media was saying.

TD: Quite different. Quite different.

AL: I see. So, were there any other difficulties adapting to life in the US after growing up in Vietnam?

TD: No, no, not, not quite. But that, I only, I only think that -- how to study good and try to come back to my family quickly and that-- that's what I think.

AL: So, once you came back to your family in Vietnam, you started teaching at the University of Saigon. Right? So, what, what made you return to Vietnam?

TD: [Coughs] Yeah, a lot of reason why I make a decision that I have to return to Vietnam. Because, that, that is almost end of the war, and I graduate from University of uh, Florida in December 19 – uh – 74, only a few months before we lost the war. And, in US, and at University of Florida, we know that we, we lose. But, I still decide to go back. There are several reason, reason. First of all, I want to reunite with my wife and two children. Secondly, I want to see my uncle and my aunt. Third one is, if the country is uh, reunite, I can see my mother, my father, my brother and sister in the North. And the fourth and the last one, and I think that I can repay to the country everything the country give me the opportunity. Look like, I can study, I can graduate from University of Saigon, I taught at University of Saigon after that, and then I went to the US. Why? A lot of people, lot of friend of mine, lot of youth die or be wounded. So, I have a lot of opportunity. They gave me a lot of chance. So, I want to repay them, so I decide to go back.

AL: Mhm. So, when you came back to Vietnam, you decided to teach at the University of Saigon, right?

TD: Yes.

AL: So –

TD: Uh, the new government let me, uh, continue teaching at University of Saigon, yeah.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

AL: So, you started teaching after the country was reunified.

TD: Yeah. After the Communist took over, the – the – the South Vietnam. You want me to tell what happened?

AL: Yeah, yeah of course.

TD: Well, I teach that. [Coughs] Well, I was controlled. I was controlled. Everything by jungle men. Because people take over the university; they know nothing about academic; they know nothing about, uh, education. They are from jungle. They come there and watch people. You know the slogan? To put right in front of university – “red is better than knowledge”. That is slogan. So, everything have to study communist uh uh theory. Look like, literally everything. And they watch me a lot. They control me. Everything.

AL: So, what did you teach at the university?

TD: Biochemistry and nutrition.

AL: So, how was that affected by, you know, the Communist saying you have to teach it a certain way?

TD: It's look like, when I say a theory from American scholar, they correct me immediately. They say that that is Russian iteration, is not American. That's the way they do. They control me anything. They control everything. So that's very bad.

AL: Yeah. So, you felt like -- did you feel like you had a lot of freedom as a professor, or just not at all?

TD: Not at all. Not at all. Not at all. Not at all. No freedom at all.

AL: Right. So, when you – when you were teaching, what was interacting with students like? What was [TD: Well--] talking to other professors like?

TD: Student – that, uh, student, uh, my own students, own student that mean, students in the South. There are some student send in from the North. But my own student, South Vietnamese uh, student, they and my assistant, they protect me, they love me a lot. They protect me everything, from the eye of the jungle men, and, uh, uh that's the way they are. So, uh, we trust everybody, we trust each other, we love each other, and until now, they still have, uh, uh, uh, class reunion, anytime they ask me to come every year, and I come to meet them. They are old right now, you know 60, 60-something, my old student, but they still respect me. Oh my professor, they like that. Every year, they have a class reunion, and I come with them.

AL: So, after – so you taught, um, at the University of Saigon for a while, but eventually, um, you decided to – there were, no, your family in Nam Định, you heard word from them, right?

TD: Yeah, but [coughs] in 1968, my sister come to the South and meet me, and uh, she told me everything about my family in the North, uh, from 1954 and beyond. She told me that, uh, uh, the new government – that is, Communist government in the North they create a program so-called land reform. Land reform. And, uh, at that time, after '74, my family moved back to my village, and they confiscate my house, uh the land, uh, of my father, even though that he have a small piece of land for rice cultivation, and uh, so, we – my family have no family to live. They have to go around, rent everywhere, and my father died a few years ago – a few years later, so that's a terrible life after '74. Mm-hmm. Make people become poor, poor, very poor.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

AL: Mm-hmm. So, what happened to the rest of your family, your older brothers or your younger brother?

TD: Yeah, well, my brother and my sister, at that time, they don't let them go to school. You know why? Because I am in the South. He – they are enemy. So, they don't let go to school. So, my, uh, brother and sister have to go somewhere to find hard labor job for surviving. That's it, yeah. One thing about that, and, yeah, difficult to – to – to...

AL: Yeah. What about your mother?

TD: Well, my mother still there. My – my mother still there and uh, try to survive, mhm.

AL: So, did they ever think about coming down to the South, or were they allowed?

TD: They are not allowed to go.

AL: So they had to stay in North Vietnam.

TD: In Vietnam. You know, they are not to allow to go, uh, far from the village. That's why, they, you know, for, you know, they want to control everything. They want to see what's going on with them because I'm in the South, even though I am 12, 13, 16 years old, and they consider me as enemy.

AL: Mhm. But eventually, you decided to leave Vietnam, right? Well, I mean, you're here today.

TD: [Clears throat] Yeah, yeah.

AL: So –

TD: When, I, uh, when I, uh, when I teaching at, when I taught at University of Saigon in 1980, uh, I see the situation in the South at that time and I heard what happened to the North as my sister told me, I thought that I cannot live with them anymore. And, especially, when I look at my two children, they have no future at all. So, I decide to go. Go back America again. Again.

AL: So, how did you manage to leave Vietnam? What was your journey like?

TD: Uh-huh. [clears throat] Uh, a friend of mine, one day he told me that, "You want to go?" I said, "Where?" "To escape." I say that, "No, I don't have money." And he said that, "No, you don't have to pay right now because uh, if you, if you get to America, will pay later." So, I decide to go. And, uh, he told that, uh, he know, uh, the organizer of the trip, he wants someone who can speak English, so he let me go like that way, so I agree that. And I discuss with my wife, and, uh, my wife told me that, uh, because of future of the children, you need to go.

AL: Mm-hmm. But it was just you by yourself, right? Your wife and your children couldn't come with you.

TD: Nope, I go by myself because I know that the journey on the sea is very dangerous. If I die, that's okay. My wife and my children can survive.

AL: So, what was the journey itself like?

TD: That is terrible. That is terrible. Uh, we have, uh, a wooden boat, about twelve meters long, and about five meter width, with uh 98 people in that. Men, women, and children, and uh, we spent twelve day on the sea, we met some high sea storm, and, uh, Thai pirate, they attack us two or three time, they take all

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

everything off us and take the women with them. And, uh, during the journey, twelve days, uh, I see two storm, very dangerous storm. And I thought that I die at that time.

You know, when I see that before I die, I want to look at sea to see what's going with the sea. I want to see it. When I look at the outside, uh, I see the water is so dark, very dark; the sky is terrible, and uh, uh, my boat sometime is – is look like going down, like go to the bottom of the sea. And suddenly, it going up, go to like, to hit the cloud. You see, the wave so furious like that. And, uh, everything, everybody say that we die. We pray before we die. So, we back to storm like that.

And, uh, after twelve day, and during twelfth day, we have no food, no water, nothing. And, the children, lot of children die. And women was – the Thai pirate take them with them, so, uh, finally, we are rescued by a fisherman of the Indonesian. And he let us to go to small island in Indonesia, and we go to, we get to the Galang Refugee Camp.

AL: So what was life in the refugee camp like?

TD: Well, I came to Galang refugee camp in the first of June 1980, and few days later, uh, the UN HCR, look like United Nation High Commissioner for Refugee Representative, he asked me to be the chairman of the camp. And, the camp at that time, a very – Galang is a very small island, about 1 mi— 1 square mile. And at that time, there are about 17,000 people, refugee there. Very crowded.

AL: Were most of the, uh, refugees Vietnamese also?

TD: Uh, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laos, yeah. And uh, I, when, uh, representative of uh, United Nations asked me to be the chairman, and they have, we have an election. People there elect me to be the chairman, and I worked with uh, with him, the UN representative, and uh, local government, look like Indonesian police there. I worked with them to solve everything in the camp.

And uh, how the refugee at that time, you can say that it's a small society. We have everybody: intellectuals, uh, professors at university, uh, um, colonel, general, uh, in military, uh, we have lawyer, we have uh, uh, businessman, we have a gangster, we have a prostitute, everything. We have crime, you know. So, I have lots of headache to work with them, so, uh, we, everyday, we have to make a report to the UN and, uh, local, uh, government. And besides that [coughs], any new, uh, boat coming, I have to int-interview them to make a report, something like that. So, I have lot of experience with the trip and when I was in Galang, I think my trip is terrible, because we have storm, we get a storm, we get the Thai pirates, twelve days is the trip, and, uh, lots of people die during the trip. But to compare with others, we have – we are nothing. Look like, a trip, some trips, uh, about a hundred people come, only two people survive. Um, they have to eat the human flesh for surviving, something like that. There are so, when I read it, make me you know, broken heart - my heart.

AL: So how did you leave Galang, like, what was the resettlement process into the US like?

TD: [Coughs] Well, the process for refugee camp, if I am the newcomer, I was called for interview, uh, by UN – United Nations representative, they class-classified me what kind of people I am. And what do you want, what do I want to go, what country I want to go. So, uh, after the interview, uh, I went for the representative of the country I want to go. It take about six months. Three months to six months to wait. When the representative of the country to come, they called me, accept or not. Accept me to go his country or not, if I would accept it. So, he asked me to stay there and wait for the trip to the country I want to go. It take about three, uh, to six more months, yeah.

AL: So, in total it was about somewhere between 6 months-

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

TD: About...

AL: To a year?

TD: Uh 6 months to 2 years, yeah, something like that. [Coughs]

AL: So, eventually you came to America, and so what city did you go to?

TD: Well, first of all I went back to Florida to visit my professor, my friends, my old university, and then I decide to choose Houston, Texas. Because at that time a lot of people choose Texas and uh, California, uh, Orange County in California, so I choose Texas.

AL: Why did a lot of people choose Texas and California?

TD: Uh, I think most of the – the first thing is the weather. It looks like in Vietnam. [clears throat]

AL: Was that, maybe, were there, would another be a thing be because there was already a community of Vietnamese-Americans?

TD: No, at that time we don't have much. In 1980s, the Vietnamese community here about 10,000 or 8,000 people, and they live scattered in, uh, the area. They are not live in one place. [Coughs]

AL: So, what made you choose Houston in particular?

TD: Why I chose it?

AL: Yeah, why you chose Houston?

TD: Because a lot of people newcomer coming here. And um, you know that, uh, since I lived in Galang refugee camp, I see a lot of refugees, and I read a lot of stories of the trip, and I think that... uh... what I study, do like biochemistry, can I help people? Can I help refugees? Can I help some people suffering right away? So, I think that I need to change the way of life. So, I want to help people. I want to work for, do like a uh, social work. I want to do something for the people suffering, suffering, so I choose Houston.

AL: So, when you came to Houston what job did you take?

TD: Well, I applied a job for the International Refugee, uh, Service, yeah. This non-profit organization to help poor refugees, not only Vietnamese, but Cambodian, Laos, uh, East European at that time lots of the East European to come.

AL: So, what did you do for them specifically?

TD: Uh, counseling. Counseling. Mm-hm, and, uh, health and look like they just come, to help them to do some paper, something like that, paperwork, Mm-hm.

AL: So, what did you like most about living in Houston, [TD: Hm?] like what did you like about living in Houston the most?

TD: What do you, do you like?

AL: Yeah, what do you like about Houston... the best?

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

TD: Well, I just told you that... Uh, you know, Houston at that time is not like they look like this time. Downtown looks like western ci – town you see in the film, very boring and lots of slums and lots of poor people were around the city. Not like that time, yeah. But, in especially, uh, a lot of fields look like I can take an example, look like you go the Bellaire Boulevard, southeast Bellaire area. Uh, if you go to, um, past Beltway 8 – at that time we don't have Beltway 8 – and, uh, two sides of the, uh, Bellaire area is uh, cotton or tomato, or cornfield. They don't have buildings, they don't have houses like today. But I like Houston because the weather is better and the weather is better.

AL: Mm-hm. So, what – what about somethings you didn't like about Houston. Was there anything you found difficult about living here?

TD: No. No, much better. I, I am, am happy with the, with the, uh, I am happy to live in here, in Houston. I think I consider that is my, my-my hometown.

AL: Mm-hm. So, what about, like, differences living in Houston versus living in, like, Saigon? What were some differences?

TD: Differences between Houston and Saigon? [**AL:** Mm-hm.] Well, in here, when, when I moved here in 1980, and everybody think that we are so happy because we have look like freedom. That's the most important, most important, freedom. Lot of food, safe food, uh, transportation, and we enjoy that. And in Vietnam we don't have like that. [coughs]

AL: So, you said at the time there was a lot of refugees coming from all around the world. What about, like, the Vietnamese community in Houston?

TD: Well, at the time we do have Vietnamese community, we do have. But, uh, not too many know about that, not uh... uh, only – only at that time, you know, during weekends people gather at the downtown for shopping because at that time we would have, we do have some of grocery shopping, uh, restaurants in downtown, especially Travis Street, Milam Street, Main Street, and lot of Vietnamese uh, business there. So, during weekends people come and, um, get together and meet and something like that.

AL: Mm-hm, so while all of this was going on, your family was still-like your wife and your children were still back in Vietnam, right-

TD: [Coughs]

AL: So, what was it like bringing them over?

TD: Yeah, the process there? Yeah?

AL: Mm-hm.

TD: Yeah. When I come to here in 1981. I can say that let me tell you that I live in Galang from, uh, June the first, 1980. I left Galang in May 30, exactly one year. So, in 1981, I come over here and make all the paper necessary to sponsor for my wife and two children. And I become a U.S. citizen 1986 and then, it take me 10 years to bring my family here. Um, my wife and children come here in 1991.

AL: Mm-hm.

TD: Exactly 10 years. Mm, so uh, so 10 years they live there, but...

AL: Did you stay in touch with them-

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TD: Yeah-

AL: -during the time?

TD: Yeah.

AL: So, they knew you were in Houston and you were safe.

TD: Yeah, that's right.

AL: So, do you feel oh how did like, did you feel like this process was like, really bureaucratic, or like, too difficult?

TD: No, at that time, [coughs] the reason why it take me ten year to bring family here because U.S. government and Vietnamese government do not have relationship. So, they can't talk, so only in, I guess, in 1996 they do have a relationship between governments. So, um, so that is the reason.

AL: I see, so what... so at the time, like, do you know what the conditions in Vietnam were like for your wife and children?

TD: Yeah. I know it because my wife uh, often wrote me letters [**AL:** Mm-hm.] and tell me. You know the newcomers come here talk a lot about that.

AL: Mm-hm. So, when your wife and children came over did they speak English, did th-- were they like used to American culture? Or...

TD: Well, [coughs] that was difficult for them. For me, it's no problem. But look like newcomer they come a lot of difficulties because they don't have, they cannot speak English.

AL: Mm-hm,

TD: So, it take for a while.

AL: I see.

TD: So especially my children, uh, they went to school it take them for a while [**AL:** Mm-hm.] to get used to that. [clears throat]

AL: But were like...so did your children and you for example, do you still see yourselves. Do you guys still strongly identify as being Vietnamese? Or did you eventually say well you know, I've lived here for so long, I feel more American now.

TD: [Clears throat] No. I consider and my children and my wife too, they consider as Vietnamese-American. Uh, yeah.

AL: I see. Mm-hm. So nowadays, you work for the HPD, the Houston Police Department, correct?

TD: Yes.

AL: Mm-hm. So, how did you end up working...

TD: Get into that?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

AL: Sorry?

TD: How did I get into that?

AL: Yeah.

TD: Well you know that since 1990, not too many peo – refugee come to this country. Less and less, so I think that I have to find newer job, but still related with people, to help people. So, I'm lucky again. Uh, at that time, not too many Asians working for government, since, in 1990 and before that. So, I am lucky, because I know Ms. Martha Wong. She's a city council at that time, Martha Wong, and uh Ms. Uh, Pauline Van Tho she's a former (?) senator of south Vietnam, and especially Mrs. Perkins. She is president of, uh, West Memorial, uh, Club, something like that. Three ladies help me to get into the job for, for HPD.

AL: So, what do you do at the HPD?

TD: Well, I work for HPD as uh, an uh, community liaison, Asian community liaison, Mm-hm.

AL: So, what do you do specifically- like every- like what would your day-to-day work be?

TD: Let- let me tell you. At that time, HPD, uh, we do have, I remember we do have only three police officers, three Vietnamese police officer. About ten Asian police officer, not too many with a big, big city. So, after five years, uh we do increase to fifty Vietnamese police officers, about one hundred Asian police officers.

And, the reason is I work with the Asian community. I work very close with Vietnamese community, very close with the Korean, Thai, Cambodian, Laos, uh, Indian, Pakistan, something like that. So, they know it and we use to, used to invite police officers to come and talk with the community, so they get to know the local government. And they know the recruitment for the police uh, department, so a lot of youth to enroll to the uh police department.

AL: Mm-hm, so do you think like before you became a community liaison, there was a lot of distrust um, for the police among Asian Americans? Like-- [**TD:** You have what?] scared of them?

TD: Yeah. Most Asians, they don't want to talk to the police, you know. They stay away of that, but be- after that, I brought the police officers to the community, they get used with them.

AL: So, you think their relationship has improved a lot?

TD: A lot, a lot. Besides, I invite police officer to come to talk and uh we do have a television, radio talk show, I invite police officer to talk to the community. Uh, we translate the brochure of the police department into their languages, into Vietnamese, Korean, uh, something like that.

AL: So, what do these talks usually, uh-

TD: Crime prevention. Yeah. Crime prevention and recruiting.

AL: Mhm. So, why – why do you think more Asian Americans are joining the police? Like...

TD: Why?

AL: Yeah.

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

TD: You know, as a police officer, that is career. [**AL:** Mm-hm.] It looks like when the requirements is simple. Two years of college, have health, something like that, and pass the physical exam and with the salary it's equivalent to an engineer. And we are not worried about layoff so, very safe. Yeah, that's a good choice. [clears throat]

AL: So, now that there's more Asian-Americans in the police force, [**TD:** Yes.] how do you think that's helped Houston?

TD: Yeah, it helped a lot Now you know that in, in police department we have the highest growing Asia-- Asians. We have some captains, we have some captains, a lot of lieutenants, Asian tally (?) is Asian.

AL: So, how do you think that's improved, the like-- how do you feel that's improved-- like the quality of policing for HPD, like do you think that's made HPD better overall?

TD: Well, I think much, much better overall, because they understand it our, our Asian community, yeah. Much better, it improved a lot you know. [coughs]

AL: So, you also work with the FBI right?

TD: Yeah [coughs]. I work for FBI for a few years, since 19, uh, '92 to '95 I guess. Because you know at that period of time, a lot of Asian crime in the U.S. Because the computer just developed a lot of chip and, and they steal chip from the big company and share it, something like that, a lot of crime like that [coughs]. And uh, I want to help FBI for the language, and I worked for them as a contractor, uh, with my own time, with the approval of my police chief. So, I worked for them for almost 4 years.

AL: Mm-hm. So, like for – so you just did translations or...?

TD: Yeah, a lot of things, yeah. Translate in here, in uh... something like that.

AL: So how did that help the case?

TD: A lot.

AL: Yeah? Uh, how, like how?

TD: Um...

AL: Like were there a lot [**TD:** Details?] of material just in Vietnamese that you were--?

TD: You know, I'm I'm old enough. I know the slang.

AL: Oh, okay.

TD: You know, the gangsters used slang, used slang to talk with each other and I understand that. [**AL:** I see.] It help a lot.

AL: So eventually was, you know, the case successful?

TD: Very. Some cold case, we solved some cold case.

AL: I see. Would you ever want to work with the FBI again? Like do you think that –

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

TD: Well, I old now. So I don't think, I don't think so because uh, we have to travel. Every year I travel two times, each time, uh, each case is about one month. So, I don't want to live far from my family anymore, you know.

AL: Mm-hm. So overall, you've worked with HPD, you've worked with FBI in law enforcement. So, looking- like looking forward to the future, how do you think we can continue to improve relationships between law enforcement and Asian Americans?

TD: [coughs] Hopefully uh, after I retire someone have the knowledge, someone have the skill with, uh, community to continue my job and working with the law enforcement. Yeah, I hope so.

AL: Yeah. So, um, going back to your life and your family, did you ever return to Vietnam after?

TD: Yes [coughs]. I re-- first time, come back to 1996. That is coincidence, because I left my, my, uh, my family, my family in the North in 1954 and then, uh, 1975 that is the 21 years old, 21 years. And then, I come back in 1996, it's all them 21 years. So, two 21 years, you see. So, I come back in 1996 to visit, uh, my country, to visit my friends, my uh, old university, my family in the North, my mother, brother and sister. But, uh, very sad at that time, very sad because when I return, everything is changed. It changed a lot. I cannot recognize, uh recognize my own house, it changed. Cannot recognize my university because they build a lot of buildings, with uh, no order, no order at all. And people, lot of, lot of people in the streets about double or triple people in Saigon, a lot, lot people. And I went to [coughs] the North to see my mother. At that time, my mother is uh, about 90 years old, and she forgot, she lost the memory. She didn't know who am I, that's very sad. Mm-hm, very sad.

AL: What about your sister and your brothers?

TD: [coughs] They still live in the North, but the life is not-- still poor, very poor at that time.

AL: I see. So, would you ever consider moving back to Vietnam? Living with your family again?

TD: Not at all.

AL: No?

TD: Not at all, because I don't want to live with the, the communist regime. Uh, I want freedom. Uh, because they are the communist leaders there. They are dictators. They don't let us to bring the idea. Their idea is the first one, the best one. And they don't use us, [clears throat] they don't trust us, so how can we work with them?

AL: So, do you feel like the – the country is on the right path, then?

TD: No.

AL: No?

TD: No, not at all. That's the wrong way, wrong way to go. Yeah. Because you know [coughs], since 1954, they take all the North and then 1975 they took over the South. It's about 70 years; Vietnam is one of the poorest countries in Asia right now. So that is the wrong way.

AL: Mm-hm. But, so- but if you were to say like one thing that Vietnam needs to change, what would it be then? Would it be the freedom?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

TD: Democratic. Only way, democratic.

AL: I see. So in comparison to Vietnam, you know that there's a lot of Vietnamese-Americans, so what do you hope that their future looks like? Do you think they're on the right path?

TD: What? Say that again? I don't understand.

AL: Yeah, sorry. Um so, compared to you know, in America there's a lot of Vietnamese Americans-- [**TD:** Mm-hm.] like what do you hope that the future of Asian-Americans and hope the future of Vietnamese-Americans looks like?

TD: Yeah, I think [coughs] I am very disappointed with, uh, Vietnamese government [clears throat], Vietnamese government right now, but I am very proud with Vietnamese-Americans here. Look like army (?), we have two or three generals. [coughs] For science, we have a bomb lady (?), he make a bomb for Afghanistan War. And scientists, scientific, we have lots of scientific, lawyers... doctors, they are so good. So, I am very proud with our Vietnamese-Americans here.

AL: So, what about your grandchildren? Do you think that [**TD:** [coughs]] you know that they are very in touch with the Vietnamese-American or are they just considering themselves American?

TD: It's depend on the family.

AL: Mm-hm.

TD: The education of each family, but uh, in the radio talk show, I used to go to the radio talk to the community. I always tell them to keep the children speak and learn Vietnamese and the culture, do not forget the roots.

AL: Don't forget where you came from...

TD: Right, the roots, mm-hm.

AL: So, your so you-- do your grandchildren speak Vietnamese and know a lot about Vietnamese traditions?

TD: They don't know much about that, but they speak Vietnamese at home, mm-hm.

AL: Mm-hm. So, do you think that in the future, Vietnamese Americans should stay more in touch with their roots, their culture, learn more about it?

TD: Uh, in general, I say okay. It's okay with me right now the way, uh, the Vietnamese keep like that because, but, I don't know the future. But you know, except some families they are forget the roots, and it's uh, but Asian minority... [**AL:** Mm-hm.] [Clears throat]

AL: So, you've lived a really long life. You've had so many experiences, so what – if you wanted the future generation to take one thing away from everything that you've learned, what would that be?

TD: Don't forget the roots, that's the one. That's the only one thing. Do not forget the roots, you know [coughs]. Learn and speak Vietnamese and that's it.

AL: Um, so, in contrast, do you think that there's something that's missing from Vietnamese-Americans right now?

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

TD: [Coughs] So, missing? I can tell that, I just told Tania, uh, some family – not too many – some family they don't tell people, they, they don't tell their children to learn or speak Vietnamese. They are Americanized, but not too many families, not too many people like that, you know.

AL: Okay, so one final question: what – out of everything, what are you most proud of?

TD: Well, [coughs] I am very proud that, for my life? I make the right decision that, the way is helping people. I help a lot since 1980 until now. I help a lot of people. In the camp, when uh, in Houston when I work for the non-profit organization, I help a lot of people. And when I work for city of Houston, I help a lot of people. I am very proud for myself, yeah. [**AL:** I see.]

And, uh, [coughs] the one I, uh, I feel bad about, that is, uh, I cannot, I could not give back to my country what I get, its favor. To [clears throat] finish my school, teaching at university, went to the U.S. for higher education. That's the country gave me, and I have no chance to repay that. [**AL:** I see.]

And talking about, you talk about [coughs] the children or, uh, grandchildren. I can proud that my daughter, second child, she is 40 right now, and she is a pharmacist. She is very busy with her family, with her job, but she organize one traditional uh, music band, so called "Viet-wave". They play um, some Vietnamese uh, musical instruments, and last month, few months, they perform at the Asian Society, and people love it. That, that, that's the way I love it. They, they still keep their culture, uh, they don't forget their roots.

AL: Mm-hm. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

TD: No-

AL: No?

TD: That's it.

AL: Okay.

TD: Thank you very much Amber.

AL: Thank you so much.

TD: Okay.

KD: That's it, I guess.

TD: Is it okay Amber? Uh, Kelly?

KD: Yeah, it's great.