

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

Interviewee: Mai Tran
Interviewed by: Ashauna Bell
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Transcribed by: Ashauna Bell
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Setting:

Oral History interview of Mai Tran at her office/home at Mai's Nail Perfection in Houston, Texas, on March 11, 2011.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

AB	Ashauna Bell
MT	Mai Tran
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

AB: Let's begin by having you tell me a little bit about yourself and your background and your life in Vietnam.

MT: Oh, um, I came from um like you know like a—I came from uh a upper middle class fam—um you know family. Um, I was just a student in Vietnam you know of a, of a business um family you know an enterprise kind of family and um, I came here from—when I was 16.

AB: Oh.

MT: I left Vietnam when I was 16—put it that way—and the course of that is two years before I got here, so like I got here by 18.

AB: Oh okay, what was your childhood and school life like in Vietnam?

MT: It was very good. Um, it was, it was happy time um you know...um going to school; I went to uh a private school and um Catholic school um yeah.

AB: What was uh the name of it?

MT: Providence.

AB: Okay.

MT: Yeah.

AB: And it was just called Providence Catholic School?

MT: Yeah uh huh yeah...Girls School.

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AB: Um, why did you decide to leave Vietnam?

MT: I didn't decide to leave um my family think that I should be gone, you know I should leave instead of—because you know the Viet Cong came in, you know the Communist came, took over, you know, the whole country from the North and stuff so um so they, they think that you know they were controlling what you want to study, what you do with the young people that kind thing so my family decided, you know, everybody that who can leave, leave.

AB: Oh okay.

MT: Yeah, and so they send me off.

AB: Wow, okay. Did they have any um aspirations for you outside of you being away from home?

MT: No they just know that you know you go to a, uh, a foreign country, then you do study, you know, be independent you know—kinda choose what you want to be and stuff with that kind of opportunity.

AB: Okay, so why did you choose the United States or—as opposed to another country or why did they choose...?

MT: Just like everything else you know well, the American was in our country before you know. So, so my family had associated you know with the American people and everybody in the world do know that America is the place to go to you know? It is the 'land of opportunity' and you know, and education and all that stuff. So and, and on top of all that, American is the one that who always take in um, um refugee [**AB:** Right, okay.]. And we all and I came to this country as a um a political immigrant um, um refugee not, not a not an academic an economic thing, you know. I'm not like I couldn't have money to eat or anything like that, you know.

AB: Right...Um, what, what did you hope to achieve by coming to the United States, or—and have you achieved these goals?

MT: Oh yeah, exceeding it, you know. I didn't hope to achieve anything you know just, just survive the Communist you know that kinda thing, but you know you come here and you know you work hard and become successful so you know it's, it's...

AB: Okay. Um what was your port of entry to the United States?

MT: Um, California. L.A.

AB: Oh, okay.

MT: But in the order of doing that, I was a year and a half at the refugee camp in Malaysia.

AB: Oh okay, well what was, what was that like?

MT: It's rough. It was, you know, it's a refugee camp; it's just an island, you know, and you have one of those you know, kinda like um, survival kind of game, you know, kind of survival kind of show you know that kind of stuff.

AB: Wow, okay.

MT: You know you have to do your own—you know you have to get your own food and thing like that. Build your own little hou...hut to live and all that stuff and then the American Red Cross you know supply you know food and all that stuff and you sit there and wait go through all the interview and be select by different country that who come to pick up immigrant. Um you know pick up refugee but you know but we, we about 90% of us hold out to wait for American to go unless you know they go to France and Canada and stuff like that...if those

that have family that there who sponsor them.

AB: Okay.

MT: Yeah. But, us—

AB: And how long did you end up staying in this Malaysian camp?

MT: Um, I was there for about fourteen months.

AB: Oh wow!

MT: Yeah.

AB: That's a... that's a long time and I mean considering the conditions or the...

MT: Yeah.

AB: ...the survival. Okay, um how difficult was it to migrate to the United States?

MT: It was difficult. It was a life-threatening situation...I mean you risk your life. You know lots of people die you know, because their boat didn't make it, you know, to the sea or the pirate, you know, um the Malaysia Thai people pirate. You know the fishermen, they become pirates and rob you and sink your boat you know that kind of thing and even there are people who some—they, they take, um you know they kidnap the girls and sell them to brothels and stuff like that. To this day there are some family that lost that kind of member and never found them.

AB: Right, um...

MT: So it was a hardship. It's not, it's not, it's not uh like a—you get on the airplane and you go.

AB: Right.

MT: Uh huh.

AB: Right. Um, in these camps were there um not only Vietnamese people?

MT: No, just Vietnamese people.

AB: Just Vietnamese?

MT: Uh huh. The Red Cross set it up for you know for—to get us situated and stuff and some of us learned English. Some of us teach English, you know, yeah, to get it ready, you know, for United States kind of thing.

AB: Okay.

MT: It was a character building kind of year.

AB: Right, um what was the process of applying for a visa, um to the United States?

MT: Well when you get in, you know, cause we were come in as the refugee, you know, so we had that automatic not Green Card but, you know, a um what they call it? Something like immigrant thing and then you know after a year then you get um just follow the immigrant, you know, legal kind of thing, you know, that after a year that you here you get the Green Card, and then of course after five years back then, then you become American citizens if you chose so.

AB: Oh okay.

MT: Yeah.

AB: Were there any stipulations like you had to um... aside to having to live in the United States maybe five years was there anything else?

MT: Mm-mm. No, well you have to... in the thing you have to learn English you have to know English you know, because there are sometimes some people they go and get interview for the process they get turned down because the person doesn't speak English or anything like that.

AB: Oh okay.

MT: Yeah, uh huh.

AB: Um. How did you feel about coming to the United States alone?

MT: Well it was very, very scary but you know like when sometimes though, you know when you have to have to be to survive things uh you don't have time to be scared...you know?

AB: Right.

MT: So, you just kind of you just kind of keep on, keep on going kinda of thing...some people was...it was, it was a scary thing especially for a girl.

AB: Right, and so um in your travels alone being that you know, you had to go to this um um American Red Cross camp and live there for fourteen years, or months, um did you have to forge new relationships with new people in order to survive?

MT: Well, no, well you know there are other people in the same situation like me so we just kinda you know just like everything else you form a pact [**AB:** Right.] and help you know... I do lots of community service over there because I, even then I was more of those I was more young and stuff but I was, you know, I go and I volunteer at the—organize people to clean up trash and you know thing like that; and you know, clean up the island get it, you know it's just like you become this little community thing there you know and I volunteer because I have some English so I teach those who know less than me and then I go and I learn from those who know more than me.

AB: Okay.

MT: Yeah. You know I go to the hospital and do um you know...dispense you know aspirin for old people and you know that kind of thing...something simple like that.

AB: And this is after your volunteer work, the ones that you were just speaking of just now?

MT: Well, while I'm, while I'm there as a refugee...

AB: Oh. Okay.

MT: Yeah, uh huh.

AB: Oh wow...

MT: Yeah.

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AB: Um, so you've already explained how your, your family um encouraged your migration to the United States but...

MT: They didn't encourage me they just put me on a boat [laughs].

AB: [laughs]...okay. Well how do you feel that they, they took it or they responded to...?

MT: I think it was a sacrifice for them, y'know...at the time I might have not understood that but you know it was a big sacrifice you know to sacrifice your kid then but they know they might lost you forever but still your life would be better.

AB: Right. Okay.

MT: Just like a lot of situations from people from other countries too y'know?

AB: Mm-hm.

MT: People from Mexico, you know, one person go...a lot of people think that one go and that will help the family later. But not in my family case, you know, they really do just truly know they just send me just so that I have a better opportunity.

AB: So I presume um you still have um family in Vietnam?

MT: Well no it's, it's...no my mom and dad passed away since then.

AB: Oh.

MT: Yes. Uh huh.

AB: Um so do you, have you kept up with um, with like news and popular culture in Vietnam?

MT: Yeah.

AB: Can you elaborate a little bit?

MT: Ahhh, well you know, aunts and nieces and you know and stuff, and you know, they talk about um you know they always kinda like, write you all this story about the tsunami or the flood, or then whatever and you know because they ask for money you know that kinda thing. And so that because of that you do get, y'know um and, and none—a lot of us here try to you know try to see what they doing with the country y'know so, so we do it used to be really hard to get news or a letter but now it's really quick, yeah. You know the communication is just as easy as, you know, calling Paris you know.

AB: Right...Okay, um did you have any particular expectations for the United States in terms of job opportunities, social life um differences...?

MT: All of that stuff we expected to be much better and it did. Y'know um some of us y'know expecting it um y'know, there always little group of people that they think that you know what America is a you go and there is a yard in the back and you pick money, you know kind of thing but you know, but very, very few percentage of people from, from the Vietnamese p—I mean group of people y'know very few of those people think that except with just you know a small percentage but, but you know but we, we know. We know all this stuff. It was overwhelming at time but you know...um...It was good you know and we find that you know it's um very little discriminate.

AB: Okay.

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MT: You know because we work hard—hard worker group of people y’know so we at that—y’know most of my friends and stuff like that we don’t find you know there are discriminate at all...except for just you know little, little petty thing, y’know which is life.

AB: Mm-hm. Um, so why did you decide to come to Houston?

MT: Well I was—it was...I had a sister who came here first and [**AB:** Oh okay.] so you know so I...y’know so she want me to come with her, but you know originally I was gonna be in California.

AB: Oh okay.

MT: Because the climate was, was you know like Vietnam like...

AB: Oh you—do you mean um in California the climate was...?

MT: Yeah [**AB:** So was she...] and you know here too not but, but not this hot [laughs].

AB: [laughs]

MT: Well kinda but y’know we—it—we have...it’s more...it’s not so up and down like here. Like it’s kinda like California.

AB: Okay. But she was originally in California as well?

MT: Yeah and then when she came over here then you know she make me come.

AB: Okay, um how um how separate were your entries? Like how long before...?

MT: Um she, she came here oh she came here about three years before me.

AB: Okay.

MT: Yeah, she came like 1979 and I come two years, so I came in 1981.

AB: Okay. And um was she also um told to leave by your parents?

MT: No she older than me so she was...she chose to. She came with her son, with her uh uh baby yeah. But at the time she didn’t have to go through the refugee camp as long as I had.

AB: Okay do you know why or ...?

MT: Uh because you know at the time she came it’s not that many people came so you know they—it’s not congested you know.

AB: Right.

MT: Yeah.

AB: Okay. Um describe your life in America once you first arrived.

MT: Oh it was not fun um y’know, no—not much of English just ‘cause I taugt English at the refugee camp doesn’t mean I can communicate y’know what I mean and uh so it was hard and um...uh...the language barrier y’know transportations, you know all that stuff being Houston being so far. Back them, um to, to everything and not like public transportation. So you know, so we kinda...it was, it was a lot of struggle but, but you know but it was you know, it was good.

AB: So you would say that you had maybe like um functional English, just enough to kinda get you by?

MT: Yeah, oh yeah I got functional enough that they know I don't speak English but you know... Yeah but I, but I went and learn right away you know. I want you know to go to school and um you know go to work and jobs that they would um you know sewing and stuff like that that you didn't need English y'know kinda of thing. And then learn and I was you know, I was young enough when I came here to be going to start high school again, but I finish high school way ahead of time um at my age in Vietnam, so I didn't go back 'cause I want to go to work and help my sister.

AB: Okay.

MT: Instead so I never gone to coll—, to h—to um to like formal school here. Yeah.

AB: Okay. How long did you remain in California before you moved here?

MT: Just a month.

AB: Oh okay.

MT: Yeah so it's barely.

AB: Okay.

MT: Yeah.

AB: And um would you say that it was difficult for you to um like adjust to an American way of life?

MT: Not for me. Lots of maybe older people, but not for me. I was, for some reason I'm very home here.

AB: Okay.

MT: Yeah more so than um you know more so than...I almost have a problem with you know the Vietnamese people so...

AB: Would you I mean care to elaborate a little more on that is it just um...

MT: Well you know it like I, I don't you know I...I adapted like Americanized too soon to fast to...too quickly that kind of thing and you know come from a uh Third World country and it's a very, very dominated by the older and uh you know like the husband—the cultural you know different cultural you know...it make me kind of frown upon you know by the Vietnamese...they think they more you know tradition.

AB: Okay.

MT: Uh more tradition, traditional kind of thing and, and stuff...

AB: Right, so um did you marry in the United States?

MT: Yes, I met my husband, Vietnamese, but here.

AB: Okay. Um if you don't mind my asking, how did you, how did you meet him?

MT: Um at, at work...uh friends...through friends who introduce me.

AB: Okay um so you, you say that you felt really... you adjusted really quickly to the American way of life-

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MT: Yeah, yeah.

AB: Um ...and I wanted to know do you think that it was perhaps your ch—your choice of profession?

MT: No, it's um I don't think it's that. I think it's just that um...I don't think it's that because if I, I be in ... I didn't, I didn't choose this before. When I first came in I work alone you know so kind of stuff so...I think it's personality that's why I choose this profession more so than, than anything um...I don't know how to explain that um...I think I'm just the kinda person that who are....and, and I think truly to because of the refugee camp...survival you know like natures uh natural instinct kinda survival instinct kick in.

AB: Right.

MT: And I immediately went to work you know kind of thing and knowing that if I want to further anything else at all, I will have to stick with American to learn the new way instead. So I almost, in a way I avoid my people almost because you know it's a lot of time you know? Like how all Mexicans stay together all...black people stay together...all Vietnamese stay together...I tend not to do that.

AB: Oh, okay to in order to...are you saying in order to like kinda grow...?

MT: Yeah uh huh, to kind of spread out and do things because you know lots of people that who stay with the Vietnamese people; so they work for Vietnamese owner—they do all that stuff they never have...and then they cater to the Vietnamese customer so they never have to learn the English and so that's why my English get a lot further faster you know that kind of thing and because of that I just more related to my new friends, new life kind of thing so...

AB: Okay so. And I mean that's very, that's profound. Would you say that other—were there other people like you that kind of you know left and spread out as well?

MT: Mm-hm, yeah.

AB: Um, and two: do you have children?

MT: I have a boy that who 27 now.

AB: Okay, um and he—is he a resident of the United States as well?

MT: Oh yes, yes.

AB: Okay. And so how do you feel that he has um adjusted to an American way of life? Do you think it was difficult for him?

MT: No, he born here.

AB: Oh okay.

MT: He born here. I marry here remember?

AB: Right.

MT: So he born here but he he's bilinguals.

AB: Okay, that's...

MT: Because my parents uh my in-laws they don't speak, they doesn't—they didn't speak English. You know

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so they have to teach him—we have to teach him that to communicate, so it was a very good thing.

AB: Okay.

MT: Y'know in a way, we do got the best of both worlds.

AB: Right.

MT: Yeah.

AB: So, well the Vietnamese language—so Vietnamese and English was something he grew up hearing simultaneously?

MT: Well he had to learn from day one. Yeah, actually he learn Vietnamese first at home before he went to school and you know starting Pre-K before he learn English.

AB: Okay. Um did you have any particular concerns for raising your child in the United States?

MT: Not anything more than, than normal people uh, uh because you know a lot of family they try to um they try to keep that tradition thing in y'know but I'm because I'm so Americanized, I quickly know that you know what? You cannot raise a child with a different culture when you are in a different place, y'know what I mean?

AB: Yeah.

MT: And so I cannot I just say you know at your age, I'm doing what you know but that was in Vietnam you know so I raise my kid as an American way. But then we have a lot of wisdoms in old tradition thing from Vietnam that we incorporate too, so that's why I said you know, my kid do have the best of both worlds in you know, because I uh you know um respect and discipline and thing like that uh I think more than his friends who are American.

AB: Oh okay.

MT: Their parents—American parents are more tolerant of their kids y'know kind of thing but you know but we let's say we stricter but we not we didn't and we never have expecting him to be grown up as like we did y'know.

AB: Right.

MT: Yeah. So in another way were...that he's boy too, just like you know, just like typical American kid...just look Asian y'know.

AB: Right. Um so what inspired you first job in electronics and can you...I mean, how did you find that job and what were you doing essentially?

MT: Well that's what in, in Texas here we have, we have that Texas Instrument um y'know and I think being gone to like Catholic school you, you know you teach a lot of hands and patience and all that stuff in Vietnam you know all the sewings and all that stuff, so doing electronic thing is just another thing you know that you have the skill...Growing up in school with the Catholic school and um again you know you don't have to speak, you just saw the thing together that kind of stuff, so that's why um you know that's why we drawn to that and beside I can work and then go to school still because those companies they have three shifts, you know?

AB: Oh, okay.

MT: So I do like the 1 from 2, from 2 to 12 and that way I go home and I sleep for a few hours and then I can go to school.

AB: Wow, okay and so you, I mean this like um patience with um things like sewing and stuff like that?

MT: Um huh yeah, most of Asian people woman are they very, very hands on kind of stuff very tedious work, you know sewing jewelry making that kind of thing.

AB: Okay, so I mean.

MT: Creative.

AB: Right and when you were working with Texas Instruments was this like assembling...?

MT: Yeah, like an assembly line—you saw in all these types of things together and that kind of thing.

AB: Okay.

MT: Yeah making coins and stuff like that...coi, not coins. C-O-I-L. God I hate that...

AB: Um, coils for, for what, like...?

MT: Oh those little things that go into those little...

AB: Like calculators and...

MT: Yeah yeah...all these little things in there you see these little coils, coils like this (pointing at a rubber coil keychain in my pocket) It's in little wires...in them...

AB: Oh okay.

MT: Those are like thing...a lot of those things are made by hand.

AB: Oh okay.

MT: Even to this day, I think yes uh huh, but I think the difference is it made in China now you know instead of here.

AB: Um so what um what led you to eventually switch to...?

MT: Nails?

AB:—or choose a career in cosmetology?

MT: Well again, it's because of hard you know tedious work, that kind of thing, and um it's an easy—you don't have to go to school for four years.

AB: Right.

MT: You know and it's easy money faster you know kind of thing and then you can have your own business, you know Asian people tend to not to work for other people...tend to have you know small business.

AB: Right.

MT: You know so that's, that's the reason why.

AB: How would you um, how was cosmetology school for you? How was that experience?

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MT: It's good...yeah...see we, you know, as Asian, we really look down on the education system here because we, we much more um...like we learn a lot of thing way before y'all do.

AB: [laughs]

MT: Like, like I only finish high school in Vietnam, but you know I look at your college stuff—I you know it's just only the language barrier but all the math and stuff like that we learn that like when we in fifth, sixth, seventh grade.

AB: Wow, so our education is slower?

MT: Yeah not, not and it's not...to be unfair to say that you know in the Third World country when you have an opportunity, not everybody get to be educated right?

AB: Right.

MT: And those that who have them, they learn to the maximum of their ability you know kind of thing—they don't go they don't have recess a lot; they don't have extra curriculum you know that kind of thing when you say you in school for eight hours a day, eight hours is studying.

AB: Uh huh.

MT: It's, it's not a—that's why discipline is you know is you know, hard work. Discipline you know like ...work and ethic—they like you know like other people other country they have a lot more advantage on us because they have hardship we don't, you know what I mean?

AB: Yes.

MT: And I speak we as an—I am American now and stuff like that and I see that I— y'know I wish my son had the experience I had, you know, not the other hardship but you know because it does make...it does change your way to thinking and appreciate your work and all that stuff.

AB: Very true. So would you, um if you could, would you like to have, or um perhaps some kind of way have it to where your son would, would have had that same experience?

MT: Yeah I, I would but, but again I wouldn't wish my kid into the sea and risk his life that kind of thing. But I wish that he went through camp of life like that, you know that, that two years of my experience of my life I wouldn't have been who I am today if I didn't do that. But then again a lot of people didn't survive so...

AB: Right, right...

MT: You know, so.

AB: So there's definitely pros and cons.

MT: Yes, oh definitely you know.

AB: Okay, um would you say that um cosmetology is a popular career choice for Asian Americans specifically Asian Americans like today?

MT: Yeah. Well and that's the reason is because you don't have to go through school so long. Y'know, you come out, you can have your own business um in the short time you know, and you know because they like to run their, their business and work in their own pace, you know, fast or slow whatever and not very controlling by corporation you know kind of thing.

AB: Oh okay. And do you service many Asian American individuals in your...?

MT: No.

AB: No? So it's a variety of different sorts of people?

MT: Yea...um no just uh just...yeah in this neighborhood it's all just you know American about like 3% of Asians you know and they all come out from Rice...they go to school there. [both laughs]

AB: Right. Um so, perhaps or um was your salon strategically placed here simply because of um Rice? I mean of course any business owner would want to....

MT: No I just, I just I happen to start it out here.

AB: Oh.

MT: Yeah, uh huh, I start out here and it just the right good area stuff like that. But you know I been around for twenty something years so my kid is 27 so I been at least twenty-five years.

AB: Oh okay.

MT: Yeah, I work for somebody for about four years before I started my business. So this business is twenty-three years old.

AB: In this location you mean?

MT: Not this location, but, but uh. I own this whole property I was ten years a few blocks away on Bissonnet.

AB: Okay. And the—so ten years on Bissonnet, and the remaining like maybe twelve years were spent here?

MT: Twelve years, uh huh, yeah we owned this house for like yeah, twelve years.

AB: Okay and see I had no idea that you, you lived here too.

MT: I don't I don't...I just got a divorce [**AB:** Okay.] and then... That's why I move up here you know all by myself you know, that's—but no I never live here this is never been live in like that...

AB: Okay so ...

MT: I just got divorce just like about two weeks ago.

AB: Wow! Okay.

MT: And I move up here just a few months—this is not my home you know permanently you know...this is a place of business, yeah.

AB: Right. Okay.

MT: But see I own the property I always use this as an address you know because [**AB:** Right.] you know you don't have to change it again you know.

AB: Okay so um' cause because I'm, I'm a little confused, so you never really, you never lived here, per se?

MT: No this is an office.

AB: But this is just temporary living?

MT: Well we think so yeah, yeah.

AB: Okay...um...what is the ethnic composition of your neighborhood and do you like this set up? Um is it...?

MT: Um well it mostly white like as you see yeah. And uh well lots of Asian though you know. A good 25% or 30% because of the doctors. Yeah...at Medical Center.

AB: Do you like this set up or is it comfortable?

MT: I love it, I love it...yeah. It's small but I...yes? Hello?

AB: Um can you describe your interactions with your neighbors and clients and....?

MT: So okay now...what does that mean?

AB: Like um just if you um if you're really close friends with your clients or...

MT: Oh yeah, actually most you know almost 100% of my clients is my friend. Because that's all I have...I...that's all I do. I used to work, of course. I work six days a week still and I used to work like sixteen hours a day and you know all my friend kinda left me so you know I become friend with you know my client and we become like really good long lifelong friend.

AB: Okay.

MT: Like I had friend that I met doing nails it's now like twenty something years and they kinda like my sister so...

AB: Right and so definitely your um choice in cosme—er, I mean, cosmetology or manicuring...?

MT: Uh no it was, it was a great you know—whatever the reason was that I end up in this career—it was the best thing that for me. I love it and I do love the work too, and I, but I love you know uh a lot of people. I would have never of met under other circumstances if I work you know, like if I work still working at Texas Instruments...would never meet any of these people you know there are governors and mayors and people who come here you know: Professor, lawyer, doctor you know, all of that.

AB: So this profession has allowed you a wide array of different people?

MT: Oh yeah huge...I mean, I do have a connection that lots of people are envy you know and so mean that's what I was told you know I didn't just pick them out to be whatever, but you know...

AB: Right, right...And so um what is your—how would you describe your interaction with um people of other ethnicities or people who come to your businesses—or your business, and happen to be other than um Asian American...? Like you stated you live um largely amongst whites and...

MT: Uh huh, yeah. Oh no it's fine. I do have another life you know that you know, where on the weekend I go to Vietnamese grocery stores and all that stuff. Yes I do still keep contact with that, but it's not as close friend it was just you ,it's a community that's all. It's not a friendship thing 'cause you know I seem to have more thing in common with American girls, you know, than I am with...yeah so.

AB: Okay, um, are there any particular struggles that you feel that you might have faced being um a Vietnamese American person?

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MT: No, I—you know what? I had to be honestly say, not once that I have that kind of...I mean I see discrimination but I have never have one that I feel like is toward me other than just like some people that you know—once in a while once in a long while somebody was kinda like “My God you know, I must’ve paid her too much you know, ‘cause she drive nicer car than me, ” but, but that’s not because I’m Ameri...I’m a Vietnamese or anything. It’s just that you know, just like um normal pettiness you know kind of silly people that’s all you know kinda what I mean?

AB: So none of these things you feel has, has [MT: No. Mm-mm.] prohibited you?

MT: No, but I do, I do know I do, I know, I—I understood all that discrimination. I understand it, because some of the people that do come [here] you know, what they, they talk about things and they kind of stuff like...you know they like you so much—they think that you feel the same way—that they do kind of things so I know there are discrimination around, you know, and you know with my shop. I try to run it as professional as I can you know. Which I don’t allow my people to speak Vietnamese when other people who don’t speak no Vietnamese, non-Vietnamese speaker around you know that kind of thing and to make them really comfortable so you know it’s kinda, discrimination go both way. You know you have to kinda have you know, respect you know, for if I you know walk around with a chip on my shoulder, I’m sure I would get more discriminate.

AB: Right.

MT: But I, I never did. So you know, I think it’s never occur to these people to you know...

AB: And that’s very, that’s very interesting. I’ve never heard someone kinda put it that way that way that...I mean because of course we understand that discrimination is both ways but in terms of...

MT: Yeah. But we as a society we always feel like someone owe it to us because of whatever of the differences that kind of thing but I don’t, I truly don’t think it like that you know if you have enough respect for yourself, other people will respect you and I mean of course you know, except for some cases extreme thing you know what I mean. You know.

AB: And with this um not speaking Vietnamese while there’s other people—how did you even come to get that? because I’m from Odessa, Texas and...

MT: Yeah.

AB: When I go to salons and even places like hair shops...

MT: They have that here.

AB: Right, it’s, it’s...

MT: See, that’s the reason I was never hang with the Vietnamese people! [AB laughs] Because that’s what they do—they think that you know what, I say like you know you come to people home now you from your country you come to your people. This is other people home. You got to respect their rule, you know what I mean...I...you cannot just—they invited you to their home, and then you just keep on speaking your own language and they don’t understand...then they would...they wouldn’t love you, you know what I mean? And it’s the same thing. It’s just like in the same—that’s how I feel about it for...‘cause I wouldn’t. If I had helped you and you come to my house and you don’t respect me and, and stuff then I wouldn’t be further help you, you know what I mean. And you, you would come to a shop like this, you respect the people in there totally different too.

AB: Right.

MT: You know? I mean but today, today we just don’t think about it like that.

AB: Um hmm.

MT: But it's really it's just it's that simple you know if you take responsibility of your part, everything will just so jive so much better.

AB: Right. Right.

MT: You know?

AB: Um, would it be a problem if I shut that door?

MT: No, uh huh I don't think they can hear us though.

AB: There're very high powered um instruments...

MT: Uh okay oh and you can....

AB: Right, and I'm afraid that it will pick up.

MT: Oh okay.

AB: But I'm almost done, so it shouldn't [inaudible]. Okay, um are there any particular like nationalistic sentiments that you carry for Vietnam or America?

MT: Okay, so what does that mean again? Nationalistic...?

AB: Yeah, like um do you feel any particular...because you discussed your, your Americanization and I'm wondering, um because you are an American citizen, do you still feel like um, very much like um a Vietnamese citizen in the fact that your very like nationalistic...?

[Dog Barks]

MT: What? What? [Starts to speak Vietnamese and English to one of her workers] Sorry.

AB: Oh it's fine. So yes um do you feel that you have any um...?

MT: Like I discriminate against them if they not as Americanized as I am?

AB: Um well no, I mean, I just mean do you feel like while being an American citizen, are you very like pro...?

MT: I always, I always pride myself as a Vietnamese person I don't, you know, I don't, uh huh no. My root is, is intact you know yes uh huh, but I do feel that you know what? You chose to you chose to kinda leave your country and come to a new world you should adapt you know but, but no it remain, that's true. Is who you are and that's remain, you know, and it's the same that I teach my kid the same thing.

AB: Okay.

MT: You know, he might born here in this country but he is a Vietnamese.

AB: Right. So do you return to um Vietnam now?

MT: Yeah, no I don't because I don't have time. But you know yes I don't have time, but you know I have nothing against that. One day I will take my kid whenever he ready. But um, but no. Yeah.

AB: Um, let's see, do you feel that you have carved out a Vietnamese identity for yourself, in other words how have you managed your "Americanness" or your "Vietnameseness"?

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MT: I, I remember you know there's one thing about me that I'm very proud of fact that I am Vietnamese to representing. I wish that more Vietnamese representing our, our heritage in my way instead you know like you don't have to keep all of that...

AB: Mm-hmm.

MT: But you don't have to give it all up either, you know what I mean? And I try to, I try to teach the kids like that like I'm very impressed with the kid who learn Vietnamese without needing to. You know, that's that kind of stuff.

AB: Wow okay.

MT: You know, because some, some families believe you know they don't, they don't have to because their parents like my kid, he doesn't have to you know. But I think that it's just very um it's very good. I mean I think it's very necessary that you do that not just for anything but just for yourself, your root.

AB: Okay.

MT: You know something that is always yours.

AB: Right.

MT: You know?

AB: Okay.

MT: 'Cause a lot of people you know like they French you know kinds of stuff but they don't speak any because you know what I mean?

AB: Right.

MT: Um a lot of Japanese kid you know does not speak one word of Japanese you know, or read it and I think it's very sad you know?

AB: Mm-hmm.

MT: Just like I think you know all American kid needs to learn something else to you know.

AB: Yes. So it's a very anti assimilation kind of thing like, just don't come to the United States and forget all of your culture...?

MT: Yeah uh huh I don't think anybody need to forget, I don't think anybody should give up their root because that's the true you know if you, if you reinvented yourself in a way that's—you lying you know. I think you need to adapt, but I don't think you need to give up every, you know that, that, cut off everything you know? And I think that's like the key of survival.

AB: That is extremely profound.

MT: Ehhhhh!

AB: [laughs] Okay, um would you recommend that any other friends or family members migrate to the United States?

MT: Oh yeah, definitely, yes, uh huh.

AB: Can you...?

MT: I still maintain an American, and you know from since here I got, I very lucky that I successful, I travel to many, many countries, I still have not find anything that as good as American yet.

AB: Oh wow.

MT: You know, so I get, I get very um when people protest about our country in the way that—like you know we have a lot to offer and lot of people not appreciate it.

AB: Mm-hmm.

MT: You know, freedom that we have here is incredible. You never feel, you never, it doesn't matter what country you go to, um free country or not you never feel protected as in this country ever, ever and I promise you that you know Spain, France, um Mexico, Mexico. You know every—it doesn't matter. Now there is one country that I feel like a little bit up above us and that is Japan. But other than that, I'm not kidding you, I didn't feel safe—I didn't feel the government would protect you as much as much as our government protect their people.

AB: So with this, Japan um with Japan what made you feel as protected?

MT: Because they take care of their people they really take care of their people you know they don't, you know they don't just kinda like—somehow or another they very discipline they very they take care of their people.

AB: When you stated that you travelled...?

MT: No corrupt.

AB: No corrupt?

MT: Yes uh huh, they have watch dogs just like we have, you know they, they you know freedom of speech and thing like that you know—and which is impressive because they an Asian country you know.

AB: And um you've said that you've traveled, you've had the opportunity to travel can you um recount some of these areas that you've traveled to...that you've had the opportunity to...?

MT: Oh um I've been, I've been to Spain you know. France, Italy, uh Croatia, many places...

AB: Wow!

MT: Yeah, Japan. Last year, I went to Hong Kong. You know so it's many places enough for an immigrant you know I kinda of go a lot. [both laughs]

AB: Um so, how has your view of the United States and America changed since you've um since your time in Vietnam?

MT: I think it's changed but you know what a lot of people might not think the same way I do we, we change but that's what our nature of our country. We just, we constant change and who know if this for the better or for worse but we always constantly change. And that's what make us, we are. You know because you know you do, you can always find somebody who say oh you know that country with the hand in the basket kind of thing like that no we evolve that's what we found on, you know.

AB: Right.

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MT: So I think it's, it's, it's good. Change for the better and don't worry about it.

AB: So this change, this identity or ability for America to be a place of change constant change...

MT: Uh huh. I think it's found that way a lot of people who mistake and say it's not; it is, it's found that way because you know, they came to this piece of land and you know, and they send the first person—our founding father found this place—it constantly change—it's constant, constant, constant. Because we an accepting country you know, that's why everybody you know, they want to come here. You know how many people risk their life to come to this country to any country other than us? You know the Mexican come here, the Cuban come here, people from Russia, everywhere from Vietnam, and they you, know they didn't just come here, they risked their life to come.

AB: Right.

MT: You know and you don't hear somebody say you know they swimming to Canada. [AB laughs] You know?

AB: So this idea or ability to change is what you feel that kinda is one of the factors that pulls people?

MT: Yeah, mm-hmm yeah. And you know, I think we're good, and I think we have a good system. You know, and you know we have it so good and we like to complain.

AB: Right.

MT: And I'm glad for all the watchdogs you know, to complain and say it out loud and that's what make us who we are, you know.

AB: Wait I'm sorry, what, what are you referring to?

MT: Well just like everything, you know, like we have because we have change so much change, we accepting so much we get—we absorb new ideas from other people that otherwise we wouldn't have.

AB: Right.

MT: You know?

AB: Yes, that's great, but this change is something that you're very, very comfortable with?

MT: Yeah, I'm comfortable with, you know there's once in a while you know, there is some something um like political wise, you know gay marriage and all that stuff, you know please. That is like the least of our problem you know that kind of thing?

AB: And um, in comparison to a place like Vietnam, do you feel that the change...?

MT: Oh good, you know you say something about the President, you be dead the next day you know, kinda of thing you know...You don't, or you know or like you know they, they crucify something else you know, kind of thing, it happen here to with like, let's say, you don't want to screw with an IRS person. They will make your life miserable kind of thing, but over there it's really truly, you cannot say freedom of speech is...is not, never, unheard of. What, you know, you only say, what you allowed to say but not you know.

AB: Okay and so just like your um you discipline or um in education in Vietnam would you say that um that same inability to have freedom of speech or have any type of real freedoms has helped you appreciate even more Amer—like...um American things?

MT: Yeah you know, it's because we were so um, let me tell you it's just like an example and...You know I came from, I'm, I being modest, just say I came from a higher you know upper middle class. I came from a

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very—you know it's in a way, I didn't know back then, but it's pretty wealthy family. But we don't have anything like we do here, like you know, like books here. You don't have time to read it. Over there, you waiting for a book to come out to read any book you know anything. Textbook in the school you, you share you don't have like each have a book here— none of that stuff—you know and, and stuff is so good you know so when you have an opportunity you you study a lot. It's not because you were smarter or anything like that. We just do more that's all, you know. And so when you come over here, you see that you appreciate it more because you see what you didn't have and then you have kind of thing. In this country, it's like let's say, over here you know what if you have money you know, Michelle Obama have that dress on and you want that the same dress, you, you get it. Over there, there's no way that anybody who make a dress for the President's wife would make the same dress for you. Because it's like that. That's the difference of the freedom over here, over here, it's, it's the can have land, you know what, all you need is hard work, you know.

AB: Right.

MT: Over there just 'cause you have the money but you don't you not the right class or something like that. You don't get that you know, or you don't get to go to school you know. Even if you smart, you know they let the son of the President go and he stupid you know. But he, but he got that kind of thing, and we don't, so it's a lot of many people that who, who could have been a great doctor or lawyers and all that stuff and didn't, didn't get become one because they just didn't happened to be at that bridge. Now over here see, you know what you can go to Rice, you can go to Harvard, you can go to wherever the hell you want as long as you meet their criteria or your brain that's all. You know.

AB: Right. Just as long as you have hard work...

MT: Yeah, I mean it's just like I don't know how your family you know think but my Christopher have a best friend that who are black family, and they are educators' kind of stuff like that, and they against affirmative action. They against it because they say that they don't want to be just... as that they went to that school because they were black.

AB: Right.

MT: They want to be just as that, you know, they go to that school because they had an ability to go to that school. You know what I mean and I understand that point too you know?

AB: Right.

MT: And that's, that's only in this country you know. Over there it's just like yeah, money doesn't buy everything or hard work doesn't do everything for you. This country, that's it, you have the money anything possible and you know. To have money is hard work unless you go the criminal way. [laughs]

AB: Right. Well I thank you and I thoroughly appreciate it. This was a great interview.

MT: Yeah, if you need anything else you know, you call me and let me know.

AB: Okay.

MT: It's hard for me to carve out an hour sometimes...

AB: Right, right I'm very sorry about that...

MT: Oh no, no, no, no....