

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

Interviewee: Michelle Tran

Interviewers: Jocelyn Monroy, Emily Hughes (Assistant)

Date/ Time of Interview: March 27, 2012 at 3:00PM

Transcribed by: Jocelyn Monroy

Edited by: Priscilla Li (3/3/2017), Sara Davis (3/8/17)

Audio Track Time: 0:47:17

Background:

Michelle Tran was born in Saigon, Vietnam in 1960. She left Vietnam, at the age of 15, a month before the Fall of Saigon with her mother, three brothers and one sister. She immediately went to a military camp in Guam for about a month before finally moving to the United States.

Once in the United States, she lived in Queens, New York for three years and attended high school there. Her first job was as a newspaper girl, distributing newspapers and collecting money. In 1978, she got married and moved to two different places because of her husband's job in two years (Chicago and New Orleans). She finally moved to Houston in 1980 and has been living here ever since. She currently works as a social worker at Boat People SOS.

Setting:

The interview was conducted in a small conference room in the Boat People SOS office in Houston. The only people present in the room were the interviewers and the interviewee. Some office noise might be heard in the background.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

MT	Michelle Tran
JM	Jocelyn Monroy
EH	Emily Hughes
-	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

JM: I'm Jocelyn Monroy and today's the 27th of March of 2012 and I'm interviewing...

MT: Michelle Tran

JM: Uh where and when were you born?

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MT: I was born in South Vietnam um June 21, 1960 Saigon Vietnam that's the city—the country I was born.

JM: Um, did you grow up there?

MT: Yes, I uh I grew up there until I [was] fifteen years old. I came to the United States uh in 1975 due to the downfall of the South Vietnam and I left Vietnam when I was fifteen years old with my mother, my three brothers, and one sister. We came from Vietnam to uh Guam which is Philippines area and then to Arkansas and then to New York City.

JM: Um, what was the time frame for that?

MT: Oh, see, uh where I—we had to stay in the uh Guam, it's like a camp, like a military camp that we have to stay there for about a month and then we went to Arkansas um like another month and then we finally our Monsignor Higgins, he's a Catholic uh Monsignor, so he sponsored us from Vietnam to United States, so he finally took us out from the camp site—military camp site and then from Arkansas Fort Chaffee, Arkansas and then we came to New York, and we live in Queens, New York and then...

JM: How long did you live in Queens?

MT: Four years.

JM: Four years.

MT: Yeah, that's where I met my husband uh in New York.

JM: Uh what are some of your childhood memories from Vietnam?

MT: Um, you know, the cul—in Vietnam and in America, completely different culture[s]. I can tell you now it's very different. Like, um...we—we don't have like we don't have computer or games or TV back then in 1970. Um I think my, my mom, she's was a lawyer in Vietnam, so my father too they both were lawyers. So they, you know, we like we had money over there. We were above middle class. So I basically have everything and we are the first person in the neighborhood that have TV, so all the kids in [the] neighborhood would ran to my house just to watch the TV. You know, I used to stand in front— behind the TV [and] I wonder[ed] how people get into the TV. You know we get to see the movie, like um the shows, like *Bonanza* and *Wild Wild West*.

EM: Yeah. [laugh]

MT: We have *Mission: Impossible* and my sister my brother and we all look and see how do people get into the TV? Why they in there? We love it, so all the kids and neighbors and they, they we love it. And then uh the uh... we have a lot a lot of games that we create by you know how Asian people we eat chopstick? We kids we don't have toys like in America. Not like you go to Toys R' Us and get a bunch of toys. We had to create our own toys. So we have like uh...the chopstick that we have, we would get the ball and then we, we wrap the chopstick, you know ten chopstick and then we throw the ball in the sky and try to wrap the chopstick and see which you know— and how many that we can wrap and when we throw the ball up and try and wrap the chopstick. We create our own game and then you know how we say rope, the rope

JM: Jump rope.

MT: Yeah jump rope. We have all kinds of jump, jump rope. It's very fun and I think I have the most beautiful

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childhood. And like a moon lights in August we have full moon we celebrate full moon so we have all of us carry, carry the candle- um. They make different kinds lights that have dif.. fish, uh any kind, different kinds of lights

JM: Lanterns?

MT: Yeah, yeah lanterns. They have lanterns. Yeah lanterns. Very beautiful. With the rabbit, cat, dog, fish all kinds and so we carry that around the street and we sing the song and we eat moon cake. If you go in August, fifteen of August, if you go to Chinatown you can see the moon cake like that.

[00:05:00]

We celebrate—that's the day that um the people um long time ago they have a story that um the um...the um people tried to grow the rice when the full moon then the rice will grow more and more. So they wished for the rain and the rice will grow. So they live because they are farmers, most of them were farmers so they celebrate the full moon because it's uh— that's the time that the rice plant will grow. The corn and rice so that's why so...but anyway I have a wonderful childhood. I still have— I remember I had a bicycle and to go to school and that's all we all ride is bicycles to school we don't have to worry. Very peaceful, very happy life until 1975. Yeah. And when we left Vietnam, I remember the helicopter um you could hear all the bombs and the people shooting the airplane and all that— people that is very, very scary. That's in April 1975. When I came over here different. It's freedom but also very different culture. And kids easily get home from school and have to go inside their house and watch TV. Everything is like these days they have computers, laptop, game, video game, but they all inside their house and I don't think that this day any kid will go outside to play anymore because um it's not safe. It's a lot of criminals a lot of things...so it's just not it's not the same. But of course the culture is so different like...oh maybe I have to wait for you to ask me the next question about the culture and then I answer. Maybe...I talk too much. [laugh]

JM: No, you're doing fine. Um, well, how long were you in Vietnam when it was— when the war started?

MT: Um, the war start long before in '75.

JM: Yeah.

MT: It start about 1965 something like that. We have long ten years. But never directed Saigon. Saigon is big city in Vietnam. Always small, town, around the city. So, but it that April 30th is the day that they really the communists took over South Vietnam the North...

JM: So, that was the fall of Saigon?

MT: Yeah, the North of Vietnam took the South took over South Vietnam. But we left before the 30th so lucky because if we left right on that day, it could be disaster, everybody try to get out. The helicopters, the ship, the boat people try to get on. So it very, very crowded. Very, very scary. You know they shoot people in the middle of the street, it's very scary. But thank god, um me, my mom met- volunteer for USCC—Catholic Charity, so she met this uh Monsignor Higgins—he's the one that brought us here. So we left Vietnam before the day we left like almost a month before. Um.

JM: So, do you consider yourself lucky?

MT: Yes, very lucky even I remember we have like hundreds and hundred of people. I think a feel we are in airplane 747 airplane from Vietnam to uh Philippines, but we still there no break for us to sit. Everyone had to stand in a little place. There no place we can move around. And I remember I heard the shot, the shotguns as the people

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shoot from below tried to shoot the airplane. It is scare. Um very scary but um yeah but I consider we were lucky because after that boat people uh a lot of boat people tried escaping Vietnam and were killed by Thailand and by hungry and a lot of them died and a lot to them get raped, through the Thailand and what you call them?... Um uh...pirate.

EH: Oh, the pirates?

MT: Yeah.

JM: Um okay. So, now I'm going to ask you questions about your life in America. How did you feel when you came to America?

MT: That's very good question. I feel very different. Very sad um as I miss my father. Because my father he's, he's still back there in Vietnam.

[00:10:04]

My mom took us over here. But my dad, he wanted to stay with his mother. So when the communists took over Vietnam they took him to prison. To they call it pre-camp so he can—they can train him because, he's after he also the CIA. So they hate CIA. My dad used to work for um CIA program over here. So that's why they hate it so they put him in prison for seventeen years.

JM: Did they try to retrain him?

MT: Yeah. Yeah, to re-train him by his mind, mind game all of that. But make him suffer every month every day. They give him one spoon of rice exactly one spoon of rice and salt to survive. He had a room this small [points to room where interview is being conducted] with 200 people in a small room like this. So they have to sleep sideways or they sit down or have to stand and it's very packed and you know, they [inaudible]...they want to kill people. So a lot of people died. They're so hungry, so they died, they either died or they um get killed by animals in the jung—. They let people get out to the jungles, and to cut the tree, cut down the big tree stuff like that, so a lot of people, they hungry, so they eat any kind of animal in the, in the jungle, so a lot of them died. My, my father and only a few [others] that were survived. A few of his friends survived. So, after he get out, we sponsor, my mom and us, we sponsor him over here. After twenty year. Yeah.

JM: That must have been a very happy day.

MT: Yes, but I couldn't tell, I look at my dad, I couldn't recognize him. He was so dark skinny, bones, and so old. That I looked at my dad, I cried, cried so much. Yeah. But the culture is so different. The food is so different. We Vietnamese so we eat rice we don't eat bread every day. We eat rice. We don't eat hamburger. So we eat um fried rice, regular rice and fruit, vegetable and soup you know for dinner. Over here, it's completely, the food are different. The language different. None of us speaks uh English at all. And uh the culture and in my country— if you pass by the elders people or you pass by teacher, you have to fold your hand like this and when you talk to your teacher or you mother or your father you're not supposed to look them in the face, their eyes, that is rude and that is not good. So you have to look down, 'yes teacher, yes ma'am, yes sir.' Uh you do not look them in the face. You have to fold you hand like this, to show respect. But then here, kids I saw a kid in the...my school they don't have to do that to teacher they don't have to fold. And sometimes when you look at— you talk to the teacher, teacher will ask you, 'you look at my face' and I was shocked because I'm not supposed to look at teacher's face, but whenever I talk to teacher, 'yes ma'am, yes ma'am,' she will say, 'look at my face' and I was so nervous because that's not the

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way I was raised. Uh you know, we are different. So there is a lot of different custom, different things, stuff. But uh the food is very hard, the language— I remember some kid in school made fun of me because I'm Asian. I think that I'm the only Asian back then in my high school, uh called Newton High School.

JM: Where was this?

MT: In New York City.

JM: New York City?

MT: In 1975, I was.... my mom put me in 10th grade over there and I'm completely lost. And so some kid made fun of me name and everything they say I just say, 'thank you, thank you' I don't know what else to say. You know, just like 'thank you.' That's the best way. Because I saw my mom uh whenever we go to the mall, she always say 'thank you' to the cashiers and she speak English because she was lawyer. She learned English in Vietnam. But we children we learned French and we learned um Vietnamese. But we never learn English. So that's why uh it's hard for us. And all the kids make fun of us. And we just say 'thank you, thank you' and they just laugh because we, we just don't know... Yeah, but, but then, but when I, I miss my country and I miss my dad so much but yeah time, time heal everything.

[00:15:04]

And then we learned to love spaghetti, we learned to love uh hamburger; you know we learned to love American food. So now um my brother and I and my family when we gather together we eat Thanksgiving we cook turkey we don't cook Vietnamese food. You know? We eat Vietnamese food and American food that no problem. But it's worse when we first came to United States, yeah.

JM: So, what would you say was the hardest thing about starting a new life?

MT: Um, that's, uh very difficult. The language barrier and, and the um, you know, that's a big, big problem and the custom and like in my country they have uh Buddhists they believe in Buddhism and they have temples and here we just have uh you know not, not, not much people. I don't think much American people have— believe in Buddhism, Buddhists no. I... maybe a few this day. But I don't think, uh back then when I came in 1975, I didn't see a lot of temples there.

JM: So, are you Buddhist?

MT: Um, my dad was Buddhist, and then my mom is Catholic. But um...but I believe there is only one God. Now like my dad he died he passed away, um you know actually he was murdered in 197...1999. So, his ash[es] is still in the temple, so every Sunday, after I go to church then I run to temple to, to pray for him. Yeah but it's just different. Very different. The language barrier is the main, main problem. Because we can learn to love the food we eat but the language. Um when I went to school in 10th grade and I'm completely lost I don't know a thing um it's very difficult yeah. And to find job and anything and I used to be a newspaper girl uh in New York City because I don't have any skill and no, no English at all, so. It's too hard, it was tough.

JM: How long did it take you to learn English?

MT: Oh, I'm still learning English. English is uh they say easy. But it's still other language it's not, you know it's not your language though, it's hard. Like now if you learn Vietnamese I think it take you 10 years because Vietnamese language completely different we say 'a,b,c,d' we have uh we write 'a,b,c,d' but the way we pronounce

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different 'a, b, c, d' like Spanish right? But then we talk we have we go up and down. If you say ma—

JM: It's tonal?

MT: yeah if we say ma [no inflection] it mean ghost but if we say ma [rising] it mean mother if you say ma [dipping then rise] it mean rice. So when you say the wrong pronunciation it means completely different. Somebody gonna get mad at you if you say you know, wrong thing. So it's very difficult language to learn, too. Yeah.

JM: You said your first job was in newspaper?

MT: Yeah I, I was a first kid, fifteen years old girl in New York City. I'm the first girl that the gentleman that hired me for that because I need a job and I don't I can't I didn't speak any English so he say, 'okay.' He talked to my mom and he say, 'okay, I let your kid do—so I, we deliver news—me and my sister we deliver newspaper around the neighborhood like apartment complex. The sad thing is—was that um the every Friday when we tried to collect the money nobody wanted to pay. They say I didn't receive the newspaper it's all wet it was raining it's all wet so none of them – so I remember I came home crying and said if they if they—they don't pay then I don't get paid. So I remember like I, I came home and cried and said I can't collect these people's money they were mean and then I say —so my mom get me another job at the uh grocery...grocery store small uh...not a grocery store it's like a stop n go but in New York City and I said help um you know do the clerical work you know just do different thing in, in the uh shop for them. Yeah.

JM: When did you move to Houston?

MT: Oh, long story. Um yo-... I um...I met my husband in summer 1978 and—no summer 1976 and two years and he's in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and I lived in New York.

[00:20:10]

So he drove every Friday, he drove to New York to see me for two years and he drove back every Sunday ah from New York to Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh to go to school there. Every, for, for two, two years straight never miss a weekend so and he call me like \$500 phone bill back then very, very high but he get like [inaudible] grant we don't call Pell grant like these days we called this [inaudible] grant from the government gave to the student so all the money he deposit to his account just to pay for the phone bill. Call me day and night. So that's why I got married in 2008. October 28, 2008. I got married and then um moved to Chicago um move to uh New Orleans and then move to Houston. So, when I moved down here my, my mom moved down here.

JM: So, so you got married in 1978 or...?

MT: Yeah 1978 because now

JM: Yeah.

MT: I'm almost fifty-two years old I have two, two grandbaby. Yeah, yeah. They beautiful so um... but um... and not – most Vietnamese family we live in the same house. I remember my grandmother, my mother, my father, my uncle uh... you know uncle's children and us we live in big family in Vietnam but in this, in this country different. When, when the child eighteen years old they can get out start living in apartment.. their own place...apartment or what, go to school grow up. But not in my country even if you have family you still live in a big family together. So that's a very different very culture I think over here more um independent yeah. Over there, it's different. Oh, my country not a lot of women working um women usually go to uh you know, stay home, go finish high school and they usually stay home or if they go to college they...after finish college they stay home, take care their kids women

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not supposed to work in my country. It's only a man who's the leader, the father, the provider and that is the one who that um take care their family that go to work but not, not, um not the wife. So usually that's why the man over there have more power than women so my, my grandfather have like seven wives and my grandmother have only one husband. See but that happen and not only Vietnam but I believe all the country too. Um, not in America that's not...[it's] illegal you cannot do that right? People maybe have affairs but not in my country it's okay. To me I'm glad I'm in America because I, I'm not agree with that. Um that's make men [have] more power over there. So, um, if the men say yes, the, the wife have to follow. Yes. You know the wife have to cook, clean the house, take care the children, take care their husband, inside the house. The men go to work. That's it. But over here different.

Uh being a wife I have to go to give birth to the baby and then go to work um pay the bill help the husband and then take care the family you know. Make sure cook, clean, everything. More work for the woman over here too. But also the man over here are a lot better than the men in my country. They help their wives to wash dishes [loud car horn in background] not, not in my country, or clean the house, or do the lawn, uh uh different stuff. They, they a lot better than men over there. Men over there have a right to gambling, uh do whatever with his money. The woman can't – have no right to ask, you know about that. So that's make it very different um, um two different culture like that not only religion, um language but other things the family so a lot of domestic violence in my country. And nobody do nothing about it they say, 'it's your house, it's your house. If you have a problem with your husband or your wife - you hit your wife, that's your – that's your business. Nobody care. Over here you can't. There's a law. So I like United States and that I became a U.S. citizen like ten years ago yeah ten, fifteen years ago.

[00:25:05]

And I...I'm glad I'm an American citizen I'm glad I'm here because I remember my, my ex-husband, he's uh physically abuse me and I have to escape from him and I um I thank god that I live in America yeah.

JM: Uh, you said your mom was a lawyer?

MT: Yes.

JM: So was she an exception?

MT: Uh, yeah because uh... she's my, my, my grandfather is a engineer, so um. But, my mom even she practiced the law she work just because my um they both were lawyer and, so she just practiced the law just for um part time but most of time she uh volunteer a lot for Catholic charity she helped orphanage uh agency, and she raised a lot of fund and help the kids over there a lot of orphanage in my country a lot of them. So, I remember every Saturday, Sunday my mom usually took us to different agencies and buy clothes, buy food for the children and they always call me 'big sister' you know stuff like that, yeah. I have a wonderful father and wonderful mother. Yes. They, they both uh taught us a lot different point of view, so...

JM: What's been your education experience here in America?

MT: Um, the education...I first of all I, I did not agree with the one that the student this day go to school I been high school here so I know um the students here, they do not respect the teacher. They talk to the teacher they can walk out of the class when they feel like it and that's, that's 'no, no' in my country and no way. In my country the teacher have a rod to [slaps hand] you know, get the stick, and they can hit you in the hand stop that and you write ugly and if you don't listen you get in trouble but not in here. Sometimes they say they worry that could become abuse but then uh the, the, the kid take advantage of the system and so I can tell the kids here are fourteen, fifteen stand by the hallway and kissing each other. Then, then no such thing happen in my country, no. You're a student, you're still

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young, you're under eighteen, you cannot do that in the public or in school, but kids here are different. And, and that is the system, the education. Um I think they need to change that. Um uh I think they such realize that they changing like a lot of kids here have to wear uniform for school and I really like that because I saw a lot of kids try to wear sexy clothes, tight uh shorts and high you know top and these students they're they, if they focus on that, they cannot focus in education. What they learn in school. So that distract all those kids and then that trouble right there and, and I don't know how the kids in this day they're getting involved with drugs. They take all kind of pills and they—I don't know where those drugs come from, where they get it. But a lot of my clients' students, I mean clients' children that um get into drugs. Yeah from school you know and then I think there's, there's a better way that we can stop this. I don't, I don't know how we gonna do it but the school there's no there's no such thing happen in my school in Vietnam.

JM: Wait, so what is your current job?

MT: I, I am a case worker. I'm a social worker, a case—. They call me case manager for domestic violence and human trafficking so I work a lot with the uh victim of domestic violence and victim of human trafficking and I notice that a lot of mother cry because of the son um uh adopt when they leave the family of abuse, the children gonna learn thing from the father so they start to abuse the mother. I have a client that live in a shelter right now, that her fourteen son—fourteen year old son, start hitting her because all these years, he saw the father hitting her so now he start hitting his mother so this became a problem so I have—like tomorrow morning, I have to run to the shelter.

[00:30:01]

This morning, I was at the shelter—try to talk to him and get counseling he need counseling so. But, yeah that's what I do. I've been doing this for almost six years. I love what I do.

JM: Uh do you mostly work with other Vietnamese?

MT: Yes, since our agency close by Vietnamese uh area, restaurant, community and so I work with a lot of Vietnamese, but we work with Spanish, American, everybody, but the thing is a lot of Vietnamese know us because Vietnamese area yeah.

JM: So, outside of work how involved are you in like the Vietnamese community?

MT: I think my work is very, very difficult work and here, that's um—even on a weekend at night clients call me from the shelter or the shelter call me, I have to answer the phone. So my—I'm always have to be there for them so it's very difficult job. Um on Sunday I have to dedicate that day for God. So I usually go to church. Volunteer for God. I'll do anything for church. And temple you know, yes.

JM: Do a lot of Vietnamese people go to your church?

MT: No.

JM: No? Is it just like...

MT: Yeah I go to American church because um I live far away from here I live in Katy so not a lot of Vietnamese church but a lot of Vietnamese church here—southwest area. Um but um yeah I used to...and I spend time Saturday for my grandbaby. And if I volunteer teach citizenship class here, that we help immigrant people to become U.S. citizen to help them fill out N-400 applications so they can become U.S. citizen and teach them 100 questions so

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they can take a test and all that. So I, I volunteer a lot of my hour. I wake up 8:30 in the morning and I won't get out until 8:30 at night almost every day. Like I said, I love what I do. I don't know how long I can hold on to this because I getting older but as long as I still can, I will do it. You know to help the community.

JM: How did you start doing what you're doing right now?

MT: I start with um...I used to work for banking financial service company but I came to find out I want to help people. Banking business not for me, more like for sale people but um after I got divorced from my ex-husband, and I've been through abuse and I know how it feel to be abused. I mean uh if physically abuse, mentally abuse, I've been through all of that, so that why when I get this job, for helping other people, I said 'okay, I'm in.' so uh that's it that I've been working, in this field. I love what I do and BPS one of the Vietnamese organizations that have uh domestic violence and human trafficking program. We have other senior program to help uh senior too. All the programs that help um you know to help people with cancer you know, all of that. We have different kind of program for domestic violence, we the only one organization that help Asian American people.

JM: What did you teach your children about like Vietnam and their heritage in general?

MT: Uh...um, well like my I teach my kids and my daughter she's got a Master in Education but until today, now my children have to know that family comes first the family got to stick together. Um this matter um if I die or I'm alive my sis—my daughter got to take care of [her] young brother and they were—we were raised that way and we were together like uh Mother's Day, birthdays, my brother and I and my aunt, uh nephew, nieces and um all the family get together celebrate birthday at my, my house. This week, next, next birthday is my sister's house next birthday at my mother's house, but we take turns and we all do a potluck something. Family come first. Very important that family and after fa-, and religion.

[00:35:03]

I want my kids to go to church, know god we can't live without God and that's what I teach my kids and remember who, where you come from and who you are, and doesn't matter they look American but they have to know they're Vietnamese. If you ask my son and my daughter um 'who are you? Where you come from?' Um I remember Vietnamese American. Um Asian American but they cannot say that I'm American, no. They got to know where they come from.

JM: Do you still have family in Vietnam?

MT: Yes, I have my uncle and uncle and cousins live over there yeah. But my father passed away, die in 1999 July 15, 1999 he was um he was killed by two robbery guys. He was volunteer at his friend's washateria, and uh his friend asked him to help him out so they can take two-week vacation so the first week he was there two robberies came about nine o'clock they went through the back door and killed him. For \$83. So um, I, I after twenty years we got him over here and then um he stay here with us for like three or four years and that happened. Yeah.

JM: Do you still keep in touch with your family in Vietnam?

MT: It's long distance. So um my mom usually go back to Vietnam every year but we kids once a while I call home. We—this American lifestyle is so busy. I tell you when I get off of work where my day go? I'm so tired already, take a shower, eat [inaudible] jump to bed, or pray, read Bible and then go to sleep. There's no time you know and—to write letter like we used to write letter. Now we send email and a few words say 'hi how are you?' 'How's family'. That's it but that's the way that we keep in touch this day, email. Yeah. Take, you know the high

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technology—can keep people more convenient but can keep people to be far apart too. By not seeing face to face you just email each other and I don't like it. I'm old-fashioned girl.

JM: Have you ever tried using a webcam?

MT: [Laugh] Oh yeah but that ...I'm very I don't know much about computers you ask me about domestic violence and human trafficking and all of that, yes I know. But if you ask me on, on that, I don't know how to put that I – no I'm not good at that I'm—I was born 1960 so this is too high tech for me. [laughs] Maybe someday you guys can train me, help me to set up that. I will love to have one, so I can talk to my family in Vietnam yeah.

JM: So, how do you feel about being an American?

MT: I love America. Um you know like if you – I have a chance to see the world every year when I take vacation three weeks and then I can – I save little bit money I can travel um here all over United States and I went to Europe, I went to um Hong Kong, China you name it. Um, Cancun, you know. You work hard and you get and you manage your money you work hard you can do it. In my country you can't, because you have to go through the legal process with the government and then the only one man that work in the family how can he get money to travel the whole family you know this is the culture so different over here husband and wife we work, so that's why the good thing is uh we can make money here but the bad thing is we have to pay tax. In my country, we don't have to pay tax. So whatever you make, you get. That's it and then if the person that have money always have money and the person don't have money never have money because what, because if you have money, you buy house you pay cash you buy a car you pay cash so the person have money always have money, the person that poor always poor because they have never have money enough to buy a house, you know. A car is like we are one of the first person in Vietnam that in, in, in my town that part of the neighborhood we live that have a car so I remember all the kids ran out to look at the car and I remember my mom used to order from catalog.

[00:40:06]

Um Sears, Sears clothes. This day we don't wear Sears clothes but back then 1970 oh Sears is number one. Especially in Vietnam and whenever my mom ordered dresses for us from Sears oh we so happy we wear dress. All the kid, 'oh where you get that beautiful clothes?' but America is always number one and I, I hate to see our economy so bad. I'm so, so sad to economy like this because this is my America, yeah.

JM: So, have you been back to Vietnam?

MT: Uh, yes I've been back uh four, five times already but um uh it's, Vietnam is communist now so it's not the same. So I went through the um—check, you know, where they check your passport. I have to put \$5 in the passport for them to let me pass. I hate it.

JM: Is it because you're travelling with an American passport or...?

MT: No.

JM: or are you travelling...

MT: No, no, I'm [travelling] with American passport, but they look at me I'm Asian you know I come from here. Of course I'm gonna have American dollar so if I don't give them five dollar or ten dollar they will let me stand in a corner, wait for eight to ten hours you like...they look [looks at hand pretends to look at passport] something wrong with your passport and I say, 'I'm American okay.' 'But it doesn't make sense so something fishy here so you stand

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over that corner.’ And you stand there for five, ten, eight, ten hour. But if I have money I put it in the passport, they let me pass. And if I go with my friend American they let me pass because they know they cannot mess around with American. They see American face like you guy[s] face they will not mess with you guys but they know that this is Vietnamese face and we live in America we have money. And not only that the guy that, that hold down my luggage he have my luggage behind his back and I say, ‘That’s my luggage, can I have it?’ He say he check, check the number, he say, ‘no it’s not yours.’ I say, ‘I know my luggage I know the color. I, I even tie the, the, the um bow I know that’s my luggage right there.’ He check ‘no, it’s not yours.’ I say, ‘it’s mine, let me go and check.’ So I went and he said and he cannot stop me so I just walk over there and get the luggage and say, ‘see it’s mine.’ And he say ‘Yeah, can I have five, ten dollar for coffee.’ And you know five dollar over there few years ago I don’t know about now but five dollar you can buy—use for uh about you can live for a week or two weeks for five dollars because very cheap you know um with the lunch over here we eat three, five dollar or for lunch over there probably uh twenty cent, thirty cent so five dollar you can live for you know one week if you, you know manage so but I said and I asked him, ‘why didn’t you tell me that you needed money so I give it to you?’ Don’t, don’t do like that. But it’s just frustrated.

And I talked to a lady in Mexico and say Mexico same thing. She went back to Mexico she have to pay the money through the passport guy to different guy that she have to pay to get her luggage same here because they know that we go back to our country and we and I go to the market they say, ‘oh so you from America so your price different.’ The person, people live in Vietnam, their price is different. We always have to pay higher. I say why? This same thing a pan is fifty cent it got to be fifty cent how come I have to pay five dollar and the person over there, pay you know fifty cent why? And then I’m so frustrated, upset and they cheat, they lie because the communist turned them to be like that yeah. And I hate it.

JM: So, does it still feel like home to you?

MT: I went back there for, for because my family still there. So I came over there for three weeks but for two weeks I want to go home. I just miss here so much because I came over here when I was fifteen so, I just miss so much so I can’t wait to go home peace, peace and know I go to the market and Kroger and that the price like that nobody have to cheat me and I don’t feel like they put me like I’m stupid or what I don’t know that they, they cheat. Everything they have to, you have to bargain you have to stand for hour just to bargain this dumb thing and you say how ‘bout three dollar, how ‘bout three fifty?

[00:45:06]

Ah, I hate it. But I know that they that its overpriced they just want to charge me. Sad, sad, sad, but it’s beautiful country I went to Vietnam now they make uh the city very tall, very beautiful. A lot of people from here like me they came back and they invest so they make a lot of beautiful hotel a lot of beautiful places to go very pretty and but now the countryside is still beautiful, very romantic, very natural. You, if you go ever go over there you’re American so you don’t have to worry and- and it’s you’re gonna love it there. Beautiful, natural. The food is very cheap and very good. But um if you go to the fancy hotel of course they gonna get like dollar amount here but if you know where to go um you gonna love it there. It’s very cheap over there, very good food too. But um you have to be American otherwise no good so I stop. So I just – I stop last time I went back there I stop. I just say no, I want to, I went to Europe and I loved Europe and you know I went different countries so I like it so next time I make money I want to travel.

JM: So, just to like finish this, you’re very happy with being an American?

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MT: Yes. Yes, definitely, yeah. They say um, well the thing is freedom, freedom of speech and freedom of religion, and freedom of that. Over there people get killed because they believe, believe in Christi-Jesus. And they, church they closed down the communists closed down a lot of church over there. They don't let you uh go to temple or church anymore. So their army right now maybe have a war going on soon because of that. So we have freedom it's just nothing free here even if they say buy one get one free but we know they, they, they calculate the price already in there but yeah but besides that, I love...I'm happy here.

[00: 47:18] End Interview