

## Interview Transcript

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

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Interviewee: Thuy Bich Le

Interviewers: Rebba A. Moore

Date/ Time of Interview: March 7, 2012, at 10:30AM

Transcribed by: Rebba A. Moore

Audio Track Time: 57:15 (MINUTES:SECONDS)

### Background:

Thuy Bich Le was born in Saigon, Vietnam in 1971. Her family first immigrated to the United States in 1976 when she was 5. After living in Knoxville, TN with their American sponsor family, Thuy's family moved to Houston. Thuy later would attend the University of Austin where she would receive her Bachelor's degree in finance. She currently works in mortgage finance for the Citizens Title firm. Thuy works from home, and has been employed by the firm since 1999.

### Setting:

The interview centers on the areas of migration and ethnic identity explored through the context of childhood experiences, family life, and daily activities. Much attention is given to her family's journey to Houston, and her process of acculturation. The interview was conducted at Thuy's house in the West University area. The interview required about an hour. She recounted several stories of her childhood and gave us a somewhat fuzzy outline of her journey to the United States.

### Interview Transcript:

#### **Key:**

Rebba Moore (**RM**)

Thuy Bich Le (**TL**)

RM: Can you please give a brief introduction about where you were born, and umm just where were you born. Yeah, where were you born? Lets just let's start with that question.  
just let's start with that question.

TL: Okay, I was born in Saigon. Umm and [Pauses]. I umm I really don't remember much of the country, and I left when I was very young.

RM: How old were you when you first came to the United States?

TL: Ummm around 5. Yeah, I remember a few things, I was till 5, it's it's older, but not too too much. And [Pauses] it didn't get bad at that time, at the first five year's of my [Pauses].

RM: Of your childhood?

TL: Mmhmm

RM: Who did you come to the United States with?

TL: We were ugh [Pauses]we were, for my understanding we were sponsored by an American family so we did umm. Well we escaped first of all, let me go back, we did escape, and we left Vietnam and went to Cambodia. A camp in Cambodia, umm I am not sure how long we were there umm six months maybe? 3 to six 6? and we were sponsored by an American Family.

RM: Ok. Just for the purpose of the archive and whoever is looking over the interview. Could you explain more of the historical context about what was going on in Saigon at the time.

TL: Ugh, I will do my best I can. I am sorry, I don't remember too much. It wasn't too chaotic. It was um the war had started I just remember, I am the youngest in my family. All of my brothers and sisters and my mom, and she was, ugh just you know very ugh' very adamant about making a decision to leave the country, and leave everything behind. Umm It was, I I don't recall it being a very Umm chaotic time at the time when I was young, but I I really don't recall too too much about the war, and about the things that she had to gone through, she had gone through.

RM: So you said your mother, was your father a part of the picture at the time, or [fades out]?

TL: He had passed away when I was young

RM: O' ok

TL: and he had already passed when I was at the age. and so umm that's another reason why she had wanted to leave, cause there was, you know our country was being invaded, it was war, you know it was just a bad time, and my father was gone, and ugh that's why she just wanted to leave, yeah take her kids and just go.

RM: And what did your mother do before?

TL: She was before involved, she was an entrepreneur and she was involved in a lot of business, umm textiles umm herbal sales, she was just involved in a lot of business, and she owned a lot of real estate and had a lot of land soo leaving was very very difficult for her it was a decision that she said o' I am just going to have to pick up and drop everything, and just take my kids and go.

RM: You said you didn't originally come straight to the U.S..

TL: we lived in knockville, TN, and it was umm my um its my mom, my brother, and two sisters. We went straight to knockville, and stayed there for a few years, and stayed there with my sponsored family.

RM: Ok, and how did you enjoy your time in Knoxville?

TL: [slight laugh] umm it was great, actually I saw snow for the first time. Umm I I saw you know American Caucasian, blonde, American folks for the first time, and I thought well that's unusual. It was just entirely different seen, and it was very tranquil. It was some like, when you landed on American soil you just felt, ' I really want to make this place home, cause it was, from where I came from it was so different, so poor, and soo bad, you know. You you, it was entirely different scene, but I really enjoyed my time in Knoxville. We had a very very umm cordial and very warm family.

RM: And so, did you stay like close by to your host family? Or did you actually live with them? What was the living situation?

TL: O' no. We were packed like sardines in their home, but they were very kind. They opened their home to us, so we stayed with them. Umm, umm you know you just try to get settled in, and then umm I remember staying with them the whole time we were in Knoxville. Before we actually, you know, we got, we became established. And then you know we relocated.

RM: Do you have any idea how your mom initially identified your host family?

TL:O' that was a good question. She [Pauses] my brother [Pauses] and um sister were all older than I was and they relocated to Paris, they relocated to [Gasps] Europe. You know I am really sorry, I am not a 100% sure,

actually they moved away from home early, and they Umm learned English, and they started to connect with umm Asian, umm I mean American folks in the U.S. that would be interested in sponsoring, and I believe that's where the connection was made.

RM: And soo your siblings were significantly older than you?

TL: Right. I am the youngest of 5, and the ough and I am 12 years to my brother, to my next brother [smiles]

RM: O' [laughs]

TL: Yeah, so it was few many years, I am not only the youngest, but I feel like I am the only child too.

RM: O' ok. So it was really just you and your mom living with your host family at the time?

TL: O' no. My brothers and sisters, they all, we all gathered together, and we came to the U.S. together.

RM: O' oh'. Alright. You were 5 at the time, so do you remember attending Kindergarten for the first time?

TL: Yeah I do!! I remember, o gosh. I do, I remember kindergarten, or first grade, or something, and umm you know, I don't remember starting school per say, but more like go, go to the church and go to the temple, learn some English, and then we will get you kind of enrolled, and kind of acclimated.

RM: O' Ok. So when did you umm, how old were you when you first started school?

TL: [Pauses to think] I am Gonna say 7. I think. Yeah yeah yeah [Laughs]. It's been a while. It took a few years, but I am gonna' say about seven.

RM: did you go to a public or private school?

TL: Mostly public.

RM: And how were your experiences at school? Was it [Pauses] and how [Pauses] like can you just explain the school in general? What was the makeup as far as the other students, initially did you struggle with the coursework?

TL: Extremely! It was very difficult, it was very difficult to fit in, it was something, that umm you know I am really unfamiliar with, and they made sure I went to public school. Just to make sure that I blend in with the kids,, and got along with other kids, and saw all the different people, and learned about different people, different cultures, just different, just get out there and be exposed to different people, soo but you know an Asian kid whose just really, I really, really felt out of place. Umm the first few years was really hard I was very timid and shy, but Umm as I learned, I kind of came out of my shell, a little bit, and that took a, that took a few years. Soo that was difficult.

RM: Well that's understandable. That's a big change [laugh]

TL: [laugh] Well you don't speak language, you don't look the same, and you're just weird, and you know, your just a little bit an, kind of like an outcast.

RM: And soo at your public school, was it predominately White or was it more diverse, was there not a lot of Asian students?

TL: I grew up predominately Umm [makes tisk noise] [Pauses] [sighs] [Pauses] in Knoxville it was very, very a White town. It was you didn't see a lot of Asians, Blacks, or any other cultures. Ummm when we moved to Houston, when we relocated, it was umm it was also a very Caucasian, white neighborhood, white town, white children. But you know, as I grew up, it, we kind of found, we kind of found the Asian crowd, and got reconnected with our Asian Friends and community. So I grew, in my older years, I grew up with a lot of Asian friends.

RM: And when you say older, do you mean mid-twenties?

TL: I think, no I think of when I was moving towards middle school. Yeah, so it wasn't too far, but it was starting at middle school when I really had a lot of Asian friends. And felt maybe more comfortable in my surroundings.

RM: And when you were in Knoxville, what way your mom doing professionally at the time?

TL: O' Gosh. I am really not sure to be honest, but I know my, my sponsored family had umm businesses. They also ran they also ran their own business. So we all helped with their business to earn a living, or help them out in that way. So Umm that's what she started doing, but paperwork was mostly important. I think she was trying to some paperwork, to get us settled, to start our own ugh, you know branch out to seek employment.

RM: Ok, and was she ever to become naturalized?

TL: Yes, we all became naturalized. Ummm, I, it probably took a good ten years. My brother and sisters all had to become naturalized, and she was also naturalized, and because I was under 18 I was automatically naturalized under her [Pauses] care, because I was under the age of 18 [Pauses] a minor.

RM: Underage [Pauses]. Yeah [giggle] [Pauses] What age did you move to Houston? I am sorry if you already stated that before.

TL: Ugh, I am going to say 8. Yeah, maybe just off the top of my head. I don't recall. I do remember starting elementary school here. I started elementary school, and elementary, middle, high were all in Houston. Soo I started here.

RM: Do you remember why your mom or your family decided to pick up and move from Knoxville to Houston?

TL: I think she connected with some friends, who also immigrated, and they also settled in Houston, and the major, the major reason why they all wanted come down here was umm because the job opportunities were umm available. And, therefore when she connected with her contacts or friends, or what have you, umm they said, well come to Houston, living is, there's, there's plenty of opportunities for you here, so it's fine.

RM: So, how did you get from Knoxville to Houston? Did you drive?

TL: I remember [Pauses]. I remember flying. I don't recall driving. [Looks up Smiles]

RM: [Laughs]

TL: Ugh, Oh my gosh! I don't know why I don't remember. Umm I don't think we could have made the twelve-hour drive [smile slightly, then giggles]. I am not sure, Yeah, I remember flying.

RM: Did move all your stuff by carrier?

TL: Yes, everything was moved slowly, but again we didn't have very many things, soo it wasn't very difficult to umm relocate. But it was difficult to leave our sponsored family, she was still in contact with them, but we continued communicating with them. Yes.

RM: till today?

TL: Mhmmm. Yes, my mom still talks to them, and yeah we all do.

RM: When you first came to Houston, where did you live?

TL: We lived with some friends, because they were helping us out, umm after saving a good decent amount of money we rented an apartment, and then I think we were only there a year or two, and then we finally bought a house.

RM: Do you remember what part of the city you initially lived in?

TL: Yes, its all Umm [Pauses] Chimney Rock and Bellaire area.

RM: And is that where you bought your house?

TL: No, the house now is down, What's currently the Chinatown area, Bellaire and the Beltway area. But that was like 30 years ago, that was a long time ago, soo the are wasn't considered Chinatown at the town.

RM: It wasn't?

TL: It was not. Yeah, it developed into that.

RM: And how long did it take for it to develop into [voice trails off]?

TL: I think it became Chinatown in the last [Pauses]. I would say the last ten years. So it wasn't, it wasn't an Asian community, there were no Asian markets, there were a few, but not to the extent it is today.

RM: Can you explain the area initially? Like before, 30 years ago?

TL: Like before it was a very quite, not undeveloped, but very quite not undeveloped, but it was very quite. I think she wanted to stay close to her friends, cause that's where her friends stayed. It was close to a school, several schools. So it was easy to walk to school, if I didn't have a car or something like that, ugh [Pauses] it was just a very warm and quite community.

RM: And how did you like the school that you were attending there?

TL: I really enjoyed it. I really, really enjoyed it. Umm, and we were close enough to where yes, I walked to school everyday, and umm and it was a experience. It was. I did enjoy it.

RM: How did it compare to your educational experience in Knoxville?

TL: Umm, it was more on a wider, broader level. Lots of students In Knoxville I was in a very small community, and so there weren't too many kids. It was kind of a small town, but now just here, your just kind of thrown in with hundred of kids, and umm I really tried to make lots of friends, but like again you know I was still shy, and trying to come out of my shell, but I really enjoyed my time in school.

RM: And you said that towards the middle school years you started to gravitate, well you started to find more Asian American friends and kind of reconnect with, I guess that sense of identity. Can you talk kind of about kind of your reconnection [unsure laugh], i don't want to, or your kind of development or awareness of having an Asian American identity?

TL: I, I always felt of place because of my status. My immigration status, where and how I came from, umm and you know I met, I started to meet other kids who had similar history, who was not American born and who was immigrated, and o' where did you come from? And where did, O' my parents came over in CA or NY. I am so, I, I felt some similarity, and that's when I felt a little more comfortable. O' ok, so your parents are here? And that where you grew up? And that's how I grew up? And there were a lot of similarities. So I found common ground, and felt comfortable with the other children who were in the same situation as I was. SO that's, that's where the connection started, and then [Pauses] umm [Pauses] I don't know it just made me feel more comfortable.

RM: Did your mom ever encourage you to join any specific groups or organizations in general, as far as extracurricular activities?

TL: I did those things on my own, just to learn or branch out, cause you know I was the only child, kind of like the youngest, really my brothers [laughs] they never paid too much attention to me. So I just kind of did those things on my own. Just kind of found my own friends, my own group, my own Asian friends, American friends. Just learned, and kind of roamed about, and that's the way I kind of got around.

RM: Did you ever feel any sense of social, not, I guess social distance from your mother? Were there just some things that ya'll saw differently when it came, umm [voice fades off]?

TL: Always! Not at first, but yeah it turned into that. So now, you know I am the only one who was raised here, I adapted to the American ways, and learned English, and started talking back to her, and umm [Pauses], you know, we did not always see eye to eye, but umm, but I kept my roots close to home. And that's what mom always taught us, cause you know what we're here to get a better life, but we are not here to be Americans-Americans, but don't forget where you came from. Always, that's what she always said.

RM: How do you think your mom would identify yourself if someone was to ask, like what your nationality? Or like what's your race?

TL: O' she is very militant, she's very Vietnamese, she's very you know pro-Asian, and she, she's not shy or [and] very, very proud to be. She probably has just a lot of resentment, because how and why she had to leave her country, but she's very proud. Ugh, I don't, and not what did she mention that she had any regrets about leaving. All though she left a lot, and gave up quite a bit, sacrificed quite a bit. But she never regret leaving.

RM: SO when you were, when you came to Houston, what did she start to do professionally?

TL: [Pauses] [long Pauses]. O' my goodness, I think it was just, she worked in a grocery store, umm some, she worked [Pauses] ugh [long Pauses] [Pauses] I think, that's what I remember most [frustrated/anxious laughter] [Pauses] she worked at a gas station, it was something that the opportunity was there, it didn't require too much communicating as far as speaking English. It didn't require a lot of her, so that umm she got very easy jobs, you know easy's anything, she was up to doing anything. But I think it was more like grocery store, and she worked at a gas station. That's what I remember most.

#### First Interval: Twenty-Minutes Into the Interview [20.19.4]

RM: So was she your main source of income or were your siblings also working?

TL: O' yeah. Everybody worked, every, if you were old enough to work [laughs] you worked. And, and actually it was something we were really proud of doing, and I think my brothers and sisters, even my mom, not just to make a living, but they were just like 'wow, I really enjoy working. I really want to go out there, and learn a few things, and do certain things.'" So yeah, everybody pitched in, except me [laughs].

RM: [laughs] cause you were in school [laughs]

TL: [laughs]

RM: And what were your brothers doing at the time?

TL: You know we, I think my mom had connected with some friends, and you know they just found odd jobs for everyone, and honestly I don't recall. I was in school so, umm someone did office-work, and somebody did manual labor. I, umm they were all spread out, so umm I don't recall.

RM: Do you know what was everyone's educational levels? Did your mom receive a college degree?

TL: My mom was very educated in Vietnam. She was a college grad, and all my brothers and sisters were college grads in Vietnam. And one brother actually studied in Paris. My other sister, I want to say Hong Kong, she studied, they both studied abroad. The other two were both college graduates from Vietnam.

RM: O' ok. [coughs] sorry [laughs]. Loosing my voice. And so, how [Pauses] So you stayed in Houston throughout your high school, and eventually where did you, did you go onto college?

TL: Yes, I attended UT Austin. So I wanted to stay close to home. And you know when I was growing up, for the record [whispers a little] you know I was never really a good student. SO it was something I had to do, but [laughs] I really didn't want to do it. But I saw every, my brothers, my sisters, they all went to work, and they all had somewhere to go from 9 to 5. So that's what I wanted to do to. I didn't know what I wanted to be, I just wanted to go work. And I sure as heck didn't want to study, or take any more exams, and I was sick of it. But I really enjoyed college. I really enjoyed, I think those were the best years of my life.

RM: SO what did you end up majoring in?

TL: Finance

RM: Finance?

TL: Yes.

RM: And is that what you are currently doing?

TL: I am in mortgage finance right now, and it just so happened that I went back to finance. Cause it's not like that's what I aspired to be. It just so happened, that I was really good at numbers, and I was going to do something in finance, but O' well [laughs].

RM: [laughs]

TL: [laughs]

RM: so what did you initially aspire to be?

TL: You know what. I never knew, I just, I was a young care free kid who just didn't really care, and didn't really know what they wanted to be [smiles], I just [Pauses] you know, I have to think about that, just give me a minute, I'll, I'll come up with something. I just never though that o' well one day I am going to be a doctor, or a lawyer, or an artist, or anything. You know why [laughs] because i was never really a good student. So I was always like, what can I do? What am I good at? I have no idea [begins to laugh] what I am good at? You know what? I've always wanted to be a chef.

RM: Did your mom or siblings know about that?

TL: I never really shared that with anyone, cause I think, when, one of things that my mom got into was she was restaurant owner. So she opened a little Vietnamese cafe, here in Houston. And I worked there after school, and just, you know, washed the dishes. Or you know, clean the tables or you know something like that. You know? And ever since then I really got into cooking and food, and how to prepare things, and how to be in the kitchen. Soo I think I really had a love for food starting then, but I didn't know that I really wanted to be a chef. O' well.

RM: When did she start up the restaurant?

TL: My mom had lots of businesses actually. She branched out, and when, she saved up enough money to be an entrepreneur. Because that's what she was in Vietnam. Umm, it was. It was all through my high school years. Gosh, in the 80s, 85? Smething like that.

RM: Do you know if she ever had to take out loans or anything? Or was it all just from money she saved?

TL: It was all from money she saved. Yeah, we didn't know how to take out a loan, and we didn't know, yeah we just didn't know how to take out a loan. Yeah, it was all money that she saved, she acquired. And that's what she wanted to do. She just wanted to be a business owner.

RM: SO she started with the restaurant?

TL: She started to open[Pauses]..a small liquor store. It was a kind of a turnkey business, it was jsut a very small store. And then she branched out to open umm a grocery store, to make bigger. And then the grocery store, became a bigger grocery store. And then after that she got into the restaurant business, and then after that she got really tired. She said, 'I don't want to do this anymore,' it really is a lot of work. Long hours, and just yeah I'm done [laughs]

TL: [laughs]

TL: So she retired, after the restaurant business. She retired early, because my brothers and sisters were all established at the time. So they all pitched into take care of mom, and I was older. And so that was[Pauses][voice trails off]

RM: It wasn't a problem?

TL: Yeah. It wasn't something that she didn't want to do anymore.

RM: And where were the businesses originally located?

TL: They were all in Houston. What are you mean?

RM: [Nods]

TL: Umm the grocery store was actually by Chimney Rock and Bellaire, and the restaurant was downtown Gessner and Bellaire. Which is now Chinatown, but it wasn't too much at the time. Umm, and then liquor store was on Fondren and Bellaire, so right around the same vicinity.

RM: And close to your home?

TL: And why do I remember that [laughs at herself]. O' and yes, very close to home.

RM: And the restaurant was the only one that you worked at?

TL: I worked at all of them. Any chance I got to do something. Stock the, work in the stock room, and do some paperwork, or take out the trash. We all contributed to all of the businesses.

RM: What do your siblings currently do now?

TL: My brother works for, I have no idea what his title is, but he works for a company that makes [Pauses]. Large parts for airplanes. I guess? And I don't know what position he is, he's in assembly, I guess. He just makes parts, he doesn't make the airplanes, he just makes the parts. Umm my sister works for I think a computer chip company. And I think she's in the, it's not assembly, but it's in the office in shipping or ordering. My other sister is an esthetician, and she currently resides in San Jose. And I have one more brother, who is in Dallas, and he, and I think he's an auto-mechanic [shrugs shoulders]

RM: [laughs]

TL: I really don't know. Everyone does that. I think, I think that's what they're doing? [laughs]

RM: SO how did you come to live in the West U area?

TL: Umm I met my husband 8 years ago. I was living in the Westside area, towards Westheimer, and outside of the beltway, Welcrest area. He was living down in the Westhemier and Kirby. And when we met, you know 8 years ago. We got together, and actually moved in. I resided with him for a while. After years and years of deciding where to relocate, and start a family, he decided on West U. He said, you know, that's where you really want to be.

RM: Where did you meet your husband?



TL: I met through friends, yeah through some friends, yeah umm yeah just through some friends, soo common gatherings, and friendly gathering [giggles], and that's how we met.

RM: And how long was it from college to like meeting your husband, and moving to west u?

TL: O' a long long time. I' I moved back from Austin, stayed here for a while, worked, and umm it was, I didn't meet my husband until I was in my early 30's. SO umm yeah it was a long, long time [laughs]

RM: [laughs] If you don't mind me asking what's the ethnicity of your husband?

TL: He's Korean.

RM: Korean, and you said you like met through mutual friends? Gathering? Was it any kind of civic organization or something really informal?

TL: No, no very, very very causal and informal. It was not an organization., we. I don't belong to an organization [laughs], I probably should, but no I was just too busy working, and so was he, really. So we just met through friends, Very casual.

RM: When you first came to the West U area, so he said it was the place to be? Can you explain more so like what he meant?

TL: It was Umm, it was a combination of property value and well, well, most important ugh thing to consider, that he decided, made it easy to decide, was the school was very good here in West U. And it's a very family oriented area. Not only close to work, but it was property values, school, education. It was all here in West U, and that's what they focus on. So it was very family oriented.

RM: So how many kids do you guys have?

TL: We currently have to Chihuahuas. We'll not[laughs slightly]

RM: [laughs]

TL: Well we don't have any kids as of rights now, but we're gonna work on it. We're very, too busy with our careers to stop [giggles], but we are going to work on that soon,

RM: How close do you feel to your neighbors?

TL: Umm, we really don't bother them too much. We kind of just stick to ourselves. We kind of just greet them, see them here and there, say hi, but they're very nice. They are very nice. And it was a huge change for us, from where we were, but most of them are very cordial.

RM: Do most of your friends not live in the West U area?

TL: Umm we don't have too many friends in this area. Um we kind of made friends when we got here, but the majority of them, they kind of live in Sugarland, or out West, or up North. Yeah

Me; Do you still have friends from like college or high school that you keep in touch with?

TL: Yes, I still keep in touch with my college friends, and they're all over the place. And there are not to many in Houston, unfortunately. Umm, they either settled in Austin, they moved to California, a few moved to D.C. [Whispers jokingly ]I don't know why? And yeah they are kind of just all over the place. Gotta' just go find them, but they're not in Housotn.

RM: So your mom is retired now?

TL: Yes.

RM: And does she live like still in your own home?

TL: In the original home that we first bought. So she's still there. She's with my oldest sister, and her husband. And it's just the 3 of them, but my brothers and sisters are not far.

RM: And um, I am sorry if you already stated this, but what does your husband do again?

TL: He's a Physician.

RM: Where did he go to school?

TL: Northwestern.

RM: Like in Chicago?

TL: Yes

RM: [laughs] O' great school!

TL: Yeah, it is. He's really proud of it.

RM: Do you follow American Politics? Are you really into American Politics?

TL: I am sorry no. My husband does, but I really don't

RM: Did you vote in the last election?

TL: I really did, just felt like I had to [smiles]

RM: [laughs]

TL: But I really didn't follow, the you know the programs, the ideas, the pro's and con's of all the [Pauses] I really didn't follow too much

RM: But you said your husband is really, more so into politics than your are?

TL: More so because he just wants to know what's going on, he's just very into current events, he wants to know who is running, and what for, and Umm what are they for, what they are against. And yeah, I think the idea of it, but he's just, just to know.

RM: Yeah

TL: Yeah, but he's really not into it.

RM: If you were to have to pick i guess a party, what political party would you say were more, you guys lean more towards the democratic, or republican, or more independent. Umm.

TL: O' gosh. Cause it's more 50/50 but if I had to choose, umm[Pauses].I think he's more. I think he's more democratic. O' I hope I said that right[Pauses].[laughs][Pauses].umm I believe so, but it's, you know.

RM: Do you follow the news at all, or [voice fades out]

TL: I try [laughs]

RM: You try [laughs]

TL: I really do. I try to follow Umm world news, umm i try i watch local news [laughs]. He hate's it, he rather watch world news. But I try to keep up. Yes.

RM: Do you keep up with, do you or your husband keep up with any of the curent events in your country of origin for him Korea, and

TL: [Cuts in] Well he does. I don't really pay attention to it too much, I think because [Pauses] you know I should more aware of that, but I think the way I hear my mom talk sometimes that, what she had to sacrifice, what she had to give up, it wasn't really, it wasn't easy for, and soo it it it builds a little bit of resentment, well a lot of resentment. And so I don't really focus on that too much, and, but my husband follows, yeah about politics of Korea. And umm Kim Jong-il passed away, and all those things he's very up to date with [smiles].

RM: And umm, have you ever, do you ever visit. well I guess not you, but has your husband ever visit South Korea, or returned?

TL: He's been back several times. Umm, you know his situation is the opposite of mine. He wasn't born here, but you know he didn't have to leave his country like the way we did. And so he visited several times. Soo in the years that I've been here, I swore I would never go back to Vietnam, I just though nah'. I got kicked out of that country soo I i don't want to go back [laughs], I don't wanna [laughs]. So it's not that I don't love my people, but man, you know it was very difficult for us, but I finally did go back in 09'.

RM: O' you did?

TL: Yeah, I did go back. And it was just 10 days of vacationing with some friends who decide to go. I, If they had not invited me to go [voice softens] I would not have gone.

RM: And can you explain kind of what your experience was like on the trip?

TL: Ummm

RM: What you did?

TL: umm immediately felt like a foreigner even though that was my country, that was my home. I did go back, and visit my old home. Because mom gave me the address. And so I just went, and looked, and it was nothing like I remembered, but umm I really felt out of place. Like this is no longer my home.

RM: Did your mom ever wish to return, or no desire?

TL: She's never gone back! And Never! [laughs] oo' she doesn't wasn't to even think about it. There are other countries that she wants to go see. So she's traveled all over the place, but she says, 'yeah, I'll go to Paris or Rome or Fujj, but nah' I don't want to go back.' So I think it's really hard for her.

RM: Right. Was she ever able to acquire any of the things that you had to leave behind as far as, like [Pauses]

TL: She lost everything. Yeah, that's why it was really hard.

RM: And, um, when you were going there for, it was for more like vacation? So, you stayed at like I'm guessing a hotel

TL: We stayed with some friends who had a home there.

RM: Oh they had a home?

TL: Yes. So, I went with friends who had friends who had a home there, so we stayed with them.

RM: Okay. So do you speak Vietnamese?

TL: Yes, fluently.

RM: Fluently. And so I guess that's your childhood. Um, and then even though you haven't I guess had children yet, but as far as teaching them Vietnamese or teaching them Korean, do you think there'll be big emphasis on that or not so much?

TL: I would try very very hard and now a days it's very hard, but I would want them to learn Vietnamese in the home, in my home. I would want them to learn Korean in the home because that's, I know that's something they don't teach in school. You can learn English from other kids, or school, and watching T.V., but, Umm, I would really really want to emphasize that. Yeah, and my mom was very adamant about it when we grew up because I picked up English, and at one point I just forgot my Vietnamese, and I would speak to my mom in English and she's like, 'Oh, no, no, we don't speak English in this house' so, you know, 'I'm not your American mom.'

RM: So she really kinda stressed [Pauses]

TL: She was very, very adamant about learning, for me to learn Vietnamese and not, that was the one thing that [long Pauses] she was [long Pauses] made sure I, I didn't forget.

### Second Interval: Forty Minutes Into the Interview [40.02.06]

RM: Were there any other cultural practices that she really, um, emphasized in the home, or just in general that, um, I guess, um [Pauses]

TL: Cultural. Um, my mother is Buddhist, umm, and there were certain things that she [long Pauses] made sure that I remembered. It was the, the fall of Saigon, just, just dates [Pauses] the anniversary or the passing of my father. Um, you know, when you love Saigon and, um [Pauses] cul- not too much, she didn't really push on that too much, but she would just always would bring up some things here and there and just like, don't, don't forget these things. Yeah. If you were to forget everything else, don't forget these. Yeah.

RM: And how do you, I think earlier I asked you how your mom identified as far as nationality, racially [Pauses] but how do you identify yourself today?

TL: Oh, I'm Vietnamese. I look it, I speak it, I [Pauses] you know, I wish I could say I'm [long Pauses] American [long Pauses] I [Pauses] I don't think so [Pauses] I don't think I could.

RM: Why do you say that?

TL: Um [long Pauses] it's [long Pauses] I don't think I've been fully accepted, it's just, you know, I'm never going to, umm, Umm, I don't know what to say. I just, just because I speak English doesn't mean I'm American. I just, you know, I eat a hamburger, or something. I'm, I'm very much Asian in my ways, in my etiquette, in my [long Pauses] and that's what I would instill in my children as well. Asian etiquette.

RM: And so, um, you said, you didn't, um, you don't feel American because you feel, you never feel like you've never been fully accepted?

TL: Um, my gosh, how should I say? I [long Pauses] maybe I don't know, I, I don't know fully how it is to be an American. I'm proud to be here, I've never regretted not wanting to be here, or anything, I just think there are, um, I'm very Asian in many, many ways. Just because I don't speak English, you know, oh, or I speak English doesn't mean anything. I'm just, I'm very Asian at heart.

RM: So what are some of the noticeable differences you see between the Asian culture you're talking about and the more American culture?

TL: I think etiquette is a very significant difference. [long Pauses] Um, you know, you can see [Pauses] the way an Asian family will raise their- and I'm not saying it's better, it's just [Pauses]

RM: Different?

TL: You know it's very Asian, as opposed to, this is very caucasian, this is the American way [Pauses] this is our way, and there's, no way is the right way, like you said, it's different.

RM: And like, is that um more so, with um, like you were saying before, like talking back when you were younger how your mom quickly [fade into laughter]

TL: Yeah, she put in my place, like, what? [laughter] Um, that was one of those thing that she just, you know, that we, we just don't do that. And it's, it's, it's, it's little, it's subtle little things, you know? The shoes, and the, the dining together, or um, work ethics, um, just very little subtle things.

RM: So in the workplace can you expand, like um, maybe some of the differences, or the general experience you have? Even though you do work from home, or just in like your general journey?

TL: Um [long Pauses] the difference between work environment? Um, and I can't speak for everyone [laughter] but I'm very detail oriented, I'm very meticulous about what I do. And it's important to me to get things right [Pauses] and I'm not saying that they, that other people don't. But there are subtle differences in work hours, work um [long Pauses]

RM: It's like you're willing to work longer hours, or?

TL: Like I would to do what I need to do. And, and, you know, it's, it's just different when you see other people and how they work, and what they do, and how they do it.

RM: In the workplace do you ever feel like you were ever held to a higher standard than anyone else, or do you think it was equal and never really [Pauses]

TL: Oh It was fairly equal, yeah, it was very - I think I was harder on myself than what was ever asked of me, so, um, that is another Asian, maybe it's an Asian thing, but maybe it's just me, yeah.

RM: And then also, um, initially when you first came to the US, when you were in Kentucky, no sorry, Tennessee

TL: Knoxville

RM: Knoxville?

TL: Yeah

RM: You were saying that when you're in school, you felt very, otherized, or just very different [Pauses]

TL: Well, I always felt different. Yes, I always felt different, always felt out of place, always felt inferior, and um, probably needed to push myself a little bit more to stand out, or achieve what I wanted to do. And, you know, just, uh, when I was younger, yes, I really, I didn't speak the language, I didn't know what was going on, I didn't know this is what you were supposed to do, eat lunch, go to the cafeteria, or, I, I just didn't know, um. But yeah I got a little more comfortable, as I got older.

RM: And even though you did mention that some of that was internal, do you think that there were any external forces from like, other students that kind of made, maybe like bullying, or anything like that that you ever encountered?

TL: yes, I did. Yeah. That's why it was hard. That was the hardest part probably. I didn't speak English well, I just looked funny, or different than anyone else. I didn't dress the same. I, I you know you know I walked to school, and everyone else had a ride home. you know, just stuff like that, I always experienced stuff like that. It was, it was not something that I really wanted to dwell on, because I just thought, 'oh, okay, that's just the way you are.' And that's another American way, right? It's something that we would never do, or, you know [mumbles] as an Asian, it's like, we wouldn't, but I, that's one thing I didn't understand either. But that's what -

RM: Bullying?

TL: Mmhmm. made me really felt really out of place.

RM: But then when you came to Houston did the bullying cease?

TL: oh no it never did. Yeah, I just got, I just became, I just go thicker skin from it. SO, it was like okay, I didn't really retaliate, or, it wasn't as bad as probably some other children, but of course I experienced that.

RM: And then also, when you went on to college, and then, even though you had I guess, more um, Asian-American friends who had similar experiences as your own, umm just your general interactions with different people from different races, where they usually positive, negative, or neutral?

TL: They were mostly positive. I really didn't have any, umm [Pauses], a bad, too bad an up bringing, to remember too much about Umm, nothing really bad. I really had came across a lot of very umm, nice folk, and met a lot of nice people along the way. Soo it was a very nice, positive experience. My college years were my best. Really. I learned a lot. I met a lot of people. Made a lot of friends. It was a good, it was good years.

RM: Great. I guess I have taken up a lot of your time. So I will just skip to the last set of questions here. [Pauses]. Did you, so you were naturalized initially early on, Umm, after your mother became an American citizen

TL: Right

RM: But have you ever helped any family, or distant family, or friends through the process now that you've gone through it. Have you ever served as a sponsor family, or anything like that?

TL: I didn't really get involved in that. I am not sure why, Umm maybe after these years that it [Pauses] Umm I don't even know what the requirements are. I probably should have, but my mother's, all of our family is here, and all, most of her friends are here. So therefore, you know, we didn't really get into that.

RM: And closing questions [laughs]. I feel like you already answered this, but if you could do it all over again would you still move to the U.S., to the United States? Umm and specifically Houston? And then all though on the whole has it been a positive experience, moving here? And I guess like what has been the lowest part if you had to name a low and a high? What would those moments be?

TL: O' good question [Pauses]. Umm no. I have no regrets moving. Even though I was young, I don't remember much, but umm my mother didn't have many regrets, and my brothers and sisters never mentioned anything bout regrets. Umm, so no I don't. Would, would I move to Houston? I am not, I'm not sure. I'm, I mean everywhere is a great place to live, and I haven't been absolutely, you know I haven't been to Colorado, or Florida. So I am not sure. But Houston has been a great home, umm it resembled, whether resembled Vietnam. And my mom, I am sure that she loves it. But yes, we would probably end up here. This is, Houston has been very good to us. Umm, what was I going to say?

RM: O' the highs and lows?

TL: [Pauses] the lowest point, I would say [Pauses]. I would say the sacrifices she has to make, and and it was very very difficult for us to leave the way we did. It was just really hard for her. The highpoint, I think it's honestly, it just, it's it's just to be here. I think the high point is just having the opportunity to go through what we did. It, even though it was hard. Cause I know we left a lot of people were left behind and lost their umm, lives over just departing or wanting to leave. Just having the opportunity to go. Just to have the opportunity to sit here, and have this conversation with you. So this is the best part.

RM: And umm looking back on I guess your life has, and even you could factor in your mom in this, do you think your life in the United States has lived up to your initial expectations?

TL: Very much, if not exceeded. So I didn't know what to expect, I was just young. So um it was better, it is better. And it would have, it absolutely is better. If we had stayed I would not know what would've happened. Our lives wouldn't be like it was today. It's many times better.

RM: Do you think, cause your husband had a different story coming here, umm, I'm sorry. Umm when did he initially come to the United States?

TL: He came when he was young too, probably when he was about 2 or 3.

RM: About 2 or 3? O' ok, so he was still very young

TL: Yeah, he was very young.

RM: But do you know if his parents or him himself if they were very happy with their decision to come to the United States? Has it lived up to their expectations?

TL: Right, it was. You know his father, or his parents came over to extend his education. And soo umm they came over, you know [Pauses], umm they are very happy to be here. And they never showed any signs of regret about being here, but you know all their family, their their still in Korea. And so they're the only ones who that are here. So I am sure exceeded, umm and both of his brothers are very highly educated, and the settled down here.

RM: And when, even though you [laughs] only have two Chihuahuas now, but you said you're working towards building a family, so what do you foresee for your children's future? Or what would you like to see?

TL: [Pauses] [Sighs] Good question [Pauses] I hope they [Pauses] [sighs] grow up to be happy kids that's all I can say. Umm protect them, teach them what little I know [laughs] umm I I really [Pauses] I am really not sure. I hope they're well traveled, and spoken. And to be good kids. I am sorry [smiles].

RM: No [laughs]. That's fine

TL: [Laughs] I hope they're healthy and happy that's all I can say.

RM: Well thank you so much for doing this interview, and taking time out of your schedule.

TL: Your Welcome. I really hoped it helped

RM: No, it did. Is there anything that I maybe didn't cover that you thought that maybe helpful for just like knowing what the project is about. Or you wished you would have talked about a little bit more in detail.

TL: [Pauses] I wish I can off of the top of my head, but I know as soon as you leave I will think of it [laughs]

RM: [Laughs]

TL: [Laughs] I was like, O' I should have told her this. Ummm. I'm sorry, off the top of my head I can't share anything else that would be helpful. But if it comes up, I will let you know. '

RM: Ok [laughs]. Thank you.

TL: You are very welcome.

**[Turns of recorder]**

*Realized did not ask about the actual process of migration from Vietnam to the U.S.*

**[Turned back on recorder]**

RM: You can go ahead.

TL: My family and I left Vietnam, and by boat. And we drifted to Cambodia. Umm we stayed there for I think 3, 3 to 6 months. Something like that, and then we were sponsored by an American family, and I am not certain if it's from Cambodia, or where. But from there we flew to the U.S, and our first landing was in Knoxville to meet our sponsor family.

RM: How long were you in Cambodia for?

TL: [Pauses] I want to say 6 months, less than a year.

RM: Do you remember where you were living at the time?

TL: I am sorry I do not. It was It was a camp where all the immigrants stayed, at the camp, but no I do not remember the location.

RM: O'ok. Thank you.

TL: Sure.

**[Turned Off Recorder]**

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## Research and Interview Preparation

### **Life Before Immigration**

1. Where were you born?
2. Describe your childhood in Vietnam
  - a. What was your parent's profession?
  - b. What was your educational experience like? For how long did you attend school?

### **Process of Migration**

3. Can you tell me a little about how and why you came to the U.S?
  - a. Why did you decide to leave Vietnam?
  - b. Describe your journey to the United States.
  - c. Did you come straight to Houston, Texas?
4. How long have you lived in this area West University? What brought you here?
  - a. Before arriving in Houston did you know anybody here?
  - b. Did you receive any help when you first arrived in Houston?
  - c. How much did you rely on friends and or family when first arrived in Houston?
  - d. Did you receive services /help from any type of community organization (i.e. church, community center, etc.)?
5. What is it like living here West University?

### **Neighborhood Life**

1. How often do you talk to your neighbors? How close do you feel to the people in the community where you live?
2. How would you rate the quality of life in your neighborhood on a scale of 1 to 10 [1 being extremely poor and 10 being exceptional], why?



3. What was the most important factor you considered when deciding where to live?
4. Are you comfortable in your neighborhood?
5. What do you think about safety in your neighborhood?
  - a. Are you involved or ever attended any of the safety initiatives in your community?
6. How do the police your community treat residents?
  - a. How have you been treated by the local police?
  - b. How about other people in your family? How have they been treated by the local police?

### **Civic Engagement and Community Involvement**

**\*\***The HAA study is also interested in learning about the everyday life and different organizations Asian American Immigrants are a part of in Houston.

1. Can you tell me about what different cultural or religious organization you are involved in?
  - a. How often do you participate/attend [INSERT NAME OF ORG] meetings?
  - b. Within [INSERT NAME OF ORG] do you hold any leadership positions or a part of any committees? *If the organization is a church, INSERT church activities ex. Choir*  
*INSTEAD*
  - c. How did you first get involved with [INSERT ACTIVITY/ORG]?
2. Are there any groups that you used to be a member of, but no longer are involved with? Can you tell me why you no longer participate?

### **Homeland, Transnationalism and Politics**

3. Are you involved with any groups that do things in Vietnam? Are you involved in a group that protests human right abuses in Vietnam?
4. Do you ever go back for vacation or for other reasons? *If yes: How Often do you return?*
5. Have you thought about retiring in Vietnam why/why not?
6. Generally speaking, from what you hear and what you've seen, how do you think are going in Vietnam? Are things going better or worse since you left?
7. Do you follow news about Vietnamese television, the radio, in a newspaper or by the Internet? Are there any issues you have flowed recently in the news?
8. How politically active were you in VIETNAM? Did you vote or were you involved in any other types of political activities

### **Political Interest**

9. Are you interested in American politics? *[Only ask if they were eligible: Did you vote in the last presidential/ mayoral election?]*
  - a. Are you affiliated with any different political organizations? Why or why not?
  - b. Have you ever refused to participate in a political activity that you were invited to do? Exactly what happened, and why did you refuse?
10. Where did you usually get your news from? (ex. TV station, talk radio, the Internet, peers, newspaper, etc.)
  - a. Which one of these sources do you rely on the most?
  - b. Why do you prefer this source as opposed [INSERT ONE OF THE NEWS SOURCES THEY RARELY/NEVER USE]?
  - c. How often do you use the Internet? Do you have regular access to the Internet in your home or somewhere else? *What are the main activities you use the Internet for?*

## **Work**

1. What is your profession?
  - a. Have you always had this profession since arriving in the United States?
  - b. Why did you change professions? Or have you seen much advancement in your current career?
2. How did you first get into [INSERT NAME OF PROFESSION/BUSINESS]?
3. What was the hiring process for your staff? How did you initially recruit people, how do you currently find potential employees? Have you had any problems with your employees? What particular types of
4. Why did you choose to start your business in this particular neighborhood?
5. Would you like to expand your business? Would you ever consider opening a new store or moving your business to another location, like near the Galleria, near downtown (3<sup>rd</sup> Ward), West University, by Reliant Stadium? What would be your biggest concern if you were to change location/ open a new business?
6. Are you involved with any professional associations, union, or an employee group for Asia-Americans?
7. How did you come to be affiliated with the Chamber for Asian Commerce?

## **Children and Socialization**

1. What school do your children attend? Is their school located in this area? Is it a Public School? Do think it is a good school, do you believe your children are receiving a quality education, why or why is this not important?
2. Have your children ever been to VIETNAM]? Do they speak INSERT NATIVE LANGUAGE]?
  - a. How well does your child speak INSERT NATIVE LANGUAGE]?
  - b. What language do you usually speak at home?
  - c. What language do you usually speak with your children?
3. How easily can you and your children communicate with one another? What type of topics do you usually discuss? For example what did you talk about this past week? And the week before? How do these discussions usually start?
4. Can you give me an example of recent discussion where you and your child talked about school/friends/important issue that you? What was the conversation like? What was it about/what did it cover?
5. Do you and your child ever disagree about things? What type of things do you disagree about usually?
6. What activities is your child involved with? Do they have many friends in the neighborhood you currently live in?
7. Has your child ever tried to influence your political opinion on something? Are your children politically active? Have you ever encouraged or discouraged them from being politically active?
8. The HAA Project is also interested in what children do to help their families. Has your child ever helped you communicate when dealing with someone from the government or health, legal services or social service agency? If so, what was the most recent time this happened? Can you please tell me what happened?

## **Citizenship and Identity**

9. Are you now a U.S. Citizen?

10. Is your spouse a U.S. Citizen?
  - a. How and when did you become a citizen? What was that experience like? Scan you walk me through what happened?
  - b. Do you retain your Vietnam? Citizenship?
  - c. **OR** have you ever thought about becoming a citizen? What reasons do you have for becoming or not becoming a U.S. Citizen?
11. How old were your children when you started the process of becoming a naturalized citizen?
12. Did your child help you get through the process, or were they too young at the time? What exactly did they do?
13. Did you have help from any one else? Like a family, friends or a union, religious org, civic group, or maybe social service org?
 

**IF NOT:** Has your child ever encouraged you to become a U.S. citizen? Why do you think they want or don't want you to become a U.S. citizen?
14. In regards to your ethnicity, how do you identify? What title do you most prefer?
  - a. Do you think of yourself as Asian-American? Would you ever use this term on your own?
15. In regards to their ethnicity, how do you think your children identify?
  - a. Have you ever heard your children use the term Asian American?
16. How close do you feel to American culture/values? Would you call yourself an American why or why not?
17. Do you think your children identify strongly or weakly with American values/culture? Do you wish your Children knew more about Vietnam?
18. What does it mean to be American? What does it mean to be Vietnam?
19. Living in the U.S. have you ever felt stereotyped or excluded? Can you give me an example?
20. Do you think that things have gotten better or worse for immigrants or VIETNAM] Americans over the last few years? Why or Why not?

### Closing Questions

1. If you could do it all over again, would you still move to the US? On eth whole, what has been good about moving to the Unites States? What has been bad? Have your feelings and experiences changed over time?
2. Looking back, has life in United States lived up to your expectations? What expectations where met, what expectations were not? Can you describe how your general ideas about the United States/ Americans/ the Houston Community changed over time?
3. What would you like to see for your children's future? For your own future?