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Tran, Xuong Oral History Interview (Vietnamese): Asian and African American Residents of Holland

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Interview with
Xuong Tran
Vietnamese Resident

Conducted July 7, 1994
by Donna M. Rottier

1994 Summer Oral History Project
The Asian-American Community in Holland, Michigan

DR: This is Donna Rottier. The date is July 7, 1994 and I am interviewing Xuong Tran in his home in Holland, Michigan. Could please repeat your full name for the record?

XT: My name is Xuong Tran. I'm living in 284 W. 36th Street, Holland, Michigan. Today I will tape an interview with Donna Rottier.

DR: When and where were you born?

XT: I was born in Vietnam. I was born in the north side of Vietnam. Then we settled to the south when I was about one year old. We lived in the south side of Vietnam until we left that country.

DR: When did you leave Vietnam?

XT: I was born in 1951, so I lived there from 1951 to 1984, the time when I left there and came over here.

DR: Could you describe a little bit about what living in Vietnam was like, and your life there?

XT: Over there we living in a small house. My father was an officer and my mother stayed home. It looked like the popular the family. Just one thing interesting me is we have three generations live together in the same house. That means my grandma, my parents, and my generation, we live together. That, I think, is interesting.

DR: Did you go to school in Vietnam?

XT: I did.

DR: How many years of school did you have there?

XT: My education was complete after we graduated from University of Law in Saigon. I had to take about sixteen years for completing that education.

DR: Why did your family leave Vietnam?

XT: In 1975, after Vietnamese Communists took over my country, and because my father and I were officers. We believe that they do not allow that we live together under their control. In this new society, my family and I cannot go to anywhere without permit of local government. We don't have a right to say what we think, we don't have a right to be rich, and much, much more, but I can't remember. That's why we tried to leave my country and looking for a new place to live.

DR: How many people did you leave Vietnam with?

XT: My father died in 1980, so when we left that country, my family had my mom, my wife, my son, and myself--four people.

DR: Did you come directly to the United States from Vietnam?

XT: No. We used a boat to leave there. After one month we reached the Philippines. They gave to us a first asylum, and we lived there about one year before we arrived to the United States.

DR: What did you do during that year that you were in the Philippines?

XT: During the time we lived in the campus, I have to wait for the United States delegation. After they approved my family come to this country, I used my time over there to learn English. That's what I did.

DR: Were you sponsored by another family or by an organization to come to the United States?

XT: We come over under sponsor by Lady of the Lake church. We didn't have any relatives who lived here before. The United States delegation put me in the class they call free case. That means my family could come over anywhere under any sponsor. The Lady of the Lake Church choose me.

DR: Did you know anything about Holland, Michigan before you got here?

XT: No, we didn't have any idea about this place before.

DR: Could you describe the process you went through right after you got here? How did you find a place to live? How did you find a job?

XT: At the camp, U. S. delegation gave to us some information about a new place three days before our departure day. All we knew is cold - snow - north of America. Our trip started at a camp, stopped by San Francisco about four hours, then we took another plane to Grand Rapids. At Grand Rapids airport we met a USCC agent who introduced my sponsor to my family, my sponsor and some Vietnamese resident who like to come to welcome newcomers. Then all of us backed to Holland. In this town we lived in a house where a church paid for rent for four months, and basically my family had enough appliances, furniture and something else for our new life. After few week, a church's members began to help us to find out a job. My wife got her first job at Bil-Mar Foods and

then she moved to Prince Corporation until now. About myself, I got a job at Herman Miller, Inc. and I am still working for this company to now. So, I could say that this is a nice place to be, and there are many many nice people who we want to get along with.

DR: Where did you first live in the city, in what house?

XT: My first house is in 15th Street. That's the rental house from the church. The church rents that house for my family. We lived there about one year. Then we moved to Ninth Street. One year after, we bought this house.

DR: What year did you buy this house then?

XT: 1987.

DR: What was your first job in Holland?

XT: About one month or a month-and-a-half after we arrived here, I got this job, until now. Just only one job, that's the problem. At Herman Miller.

DR: What do you do there?

XT: The first days when I came over there, so they gave me some regular job working by hand. Lately I tried looking for opportunity to move up, try to learn some skill. Now I got a machine operator job.

DR: How much English could you speak when you first got here? How well could you communicate?

XT: My language, when we learn in the Philippines and from Filipino teacher, we try to learn words, but the pronunciation is real

worse because most Filipinos use French sound themselves. The first day when I came over here, I'd write it out better than I talking. That's the way I communicated with the new people around my family, just write it out. Lately I try to correct my pronunciation. I think that day by day my English is a little better.

DR: Did you take any classes in English in Holland?

XT: Just only about one month in ESL class, that class is English as a Second Language. But because I took my job right about a month after we arrived here, so we don't have time to come to school.

DR: Your job at Herman Miller, how is that similar to or different from your work in Vietnam, or what you did there?

XT: I think that at both places, the employers like to see their employees work hard and make production with highest quality. In Vietnam, workers get pay per month, not per week like we do here. And if we say about what is different between both places, I would like to say that in Vietnam, all of machines should be older and older, but in here all of companies must have to think about a plan to update their machines. Other hand, workers in here have to know more than one machine and have to refresh their skill day by day.

DR: Are you a member, or do you belong to any community organizations? Are you involved in any activities in the community?

XT: Because in this town, our people's gathering here is still small, I think about four or five percent. That's not much. With a small group like that, we don't have any big problems. So, between us, when we have some conflict, so we would keep talking. Then we try to solve the problem by ourselves. I think that way is still working now.

DR: How much contact do you have with other people who live in Holland who are from Vietnam?

XT: Not much because we don't have time. My people who are living in this town is not stay together--it doesn't mean they stay in the same place. We just have time weekend, and we have to live with the family, too. Myself, I have only about six or seven friends who live around here. And between us, no problem.

DR: Do you have much contact at all with other Asians from other countries?

XT: No, nothing. Because my people has a different language with another country in Asia. Like Laotian, Cambodian, or Kampuchea--I don't know how to say exactly that name, but like that--and Thailand. Another country so maybe they use the same language, but my language is real different, so we can't. I have a couple persons who work together with me. They are Laotian. But we just talking like I do with other people around my work place.

DR: You have three children?

XT: I have four.

DR: How old are they?

XT: The oldest one eleven, then seven, five, and four months.

DR: How many of your children go to school?

XT: Right now I have two. The next year my little one, five year old girl, she'll be going to kindergarten. So we have three.

DR: Before you came to the United States, what were your hopes for your family?

XT: You mean the dream, what I dream? Before we came over here, so I thought I could go back to school for refreshing my education. But lately some people gave me some advice that I have to go to work, that means, take care of my family first. Lately, if I have time and I have enough ambition, I go back to school. Right now, what I plan to do is just somehow keep the kids complete their education, and that's the plan I want to do.

DR: How are they doing in school?

XT: My eleven year-old boy right now attends fourth grade. My seven year-old girl is in first grade. And as to what the reports say so, they work very well. Otherwise I always try to contact with their teachers. So I make sure what they learn in school is okay.

DR: Your children, obviously from having heard them talk, are bilingual. Is that something that is important to you?

XT: Yes, we do that. When we home, we try to talk in my native language. When someday, their friends come over, or some of my

American friends come over, they could use English. That's good for them.

DR: Does your family celebrate any special holidays or traditions?

XT: Yes, we do. Every year we celebrate, they call the Tet. Tet means New Year here. Sometimes, if we have time, we could make a small party for our birthday. Another one is Christmas time, a big dinner for that.

DR: Has the way that you celebrate those holidays, has that changed at all since you came from Vietnam to the United States?

XT: Yes.

DR: In what ways?

XT: In my country when we celebrate Tet, the New Year, we have a lot of people, and we have a different tradition, that we can't see here. In my country I'm supposed to go to the temple. I could gather with my family, my relatives, my friends, for eating, for playing, and take a rest or do something else. But we can't do that here.

DR: You mentioned the temple. Could you talk a little bit about the role of religion in your life?

XT: My religion is Buddhism. About myself so I think, a little different with another religion over here. What I knew about my religion is, after we die, but we still have sin, so we have to go back to the earth and make another life, until all of my sin is cleared. So I go to a place that they call, look like heaven.

That's a little different. Anyway, when we thinking about any religion, they always talk to us about how to be a better people, and how I will do good things, and keep away the bad things. I think any religion, most the same basics. It's different the way they do, but basically the same.

DR: I know that there's not a temple in Holland. Is there one near here where you can go?

XT: No, a little far. Right now we have two temples. One north of Grand Rapids, and another one was just built two years ago. I hear about that new one, but we don't have time to come to see that one yet.

DR: Where is that one?

XT: Closer with some highway, but I'm not exactly know it location.

DR: Holland typically, people think it is a very conservative Christian community. Do you ever experience negative feelings from people who are unfamiliar with your religion?

XT: No, I don't have that at all.

DR: Have you ever noticed or experienced yourself any racial tension in Holland? Have you ever been discriminated against in any way because you're from Vietnam?

XT: Of course, I understood this problem in this country. But in this place, nothing happened to us in both your questions.

Because, I think that from long time ago, this place is the land of immigrants, and then generation by generation it became a

tradition. That is why when my family came over, a lot of local residents came to help us rebuild our life, some of them talk to us about a new thing, new culture. They made we have a good idea about people live in this place. That's why I don't want to move into the South of this country where a lot of my people live now. I don't want to go there because that is a big problem over there, but not here.

DR: Why do you think that is, that it's not as much of a problem here?

XT: As what I say above, this is land of immigrants. Another thing is education. I think that when we have more and more education, we will understand problems and if we need, we easier correct that problem than someone who hasn't enough education.

DR: How do you think that Holland as a community has responded to the growing Vietnamese population or the growing Asian population in general?

XT: I think that probably in the future that would happen. If that happens, I think that Holland has to have some plan to help them start in the new life here. Because what I knew is among my people, some people have enough education, but some never go to school. So their knowledge is different. I think that Holland maybe try to give to some of my people the chance to go to school, increase their knowledge, their education, and give them a chance to rebuild their lives. When their life get a little better, I think they will serve for Holland better.

DR: What do you think are the major challenges facing the Vietnamese people who live in Holland? What do you think that you, coming from Vietnam, can do for the city of Holland and the community?

XT: Because some of my people who arrive here, they have some skill, they have some education, they have some, I say each of us maybe have some good skill they could give to Holland or another community, the best something they could. I don't know if I say exactly or not, but what I'm feeling is, like myself, when I came here I could give to Holland or this community, my education. I try to teach my kids here better. Another people maybe serve to community or Holland, by their way, the old way. When we come over here, we offered to this place our traditions, our education, and our knowledge. That's the basic one that we could do. And another thing, I wish, is in future my people will understand how important to be a citizen. And then we will try to join to the life in here. That means we will have to come to work at any place, example public offices, media, courts. . . .

DR: Do you have an idea of how many Vietnamese people live in Holland right now?

XT: What I knew, is about five percent, but I don't know exactly the numbers.

DR: What changes, if any, would you like to see happen in Holland?

XT: I want that we improve our family education. Just a little different when we live here. With my people, the basic is family.

When we say it, our family means parents, kids, or maybe more than two generations. But the local people is based on the individual, so a little different. As our experience, when we take care of the kids when they still small. Lately when they grow up, like marry, my daughters, and they have a family, they will make the next generation better than we do. That means, better and better. I can't explain well, but I try to talk about that. We have to try to make our family be better, and between the parents and the kids, have good communication. That's what we'll have to follow for our community to be better.

DR: In what ways do you think life will be different for your children living here than it would have been had you raised them in Vietnam?

XT: In this country or in this place my kids have a good chance to learn and to work. I mean, they have more opportunities to build their life than another kid who now is still living in Vietnam. They over there now, lack a lot of things, maybe food, maybe education, and maybe some care from their family or the government.

DR: What have you done to teach your kids about their Vietnamese culture?

XT: We try to give to them all of our experience that we collected during our life. We try to take care them until they old enough to know what they do is right or wrong. We taught them about

family value and as my family I let them know that I love them so much. And themselves, they have to have some feedback to their parents otherwise, I let them know who we are, where we come from, why we came over here, and of course, if I have time, I talk to them about our native culture, and how much different between our culture and America's one. I think when I do so, that's meaning I give to them more chance to choose the way to live in here.

DR: To you talk to them or teach them about Vietnam?

XT: We try to get that chance. When they have any question about that country and why do we come over here, I will try to let them know what happened, what's going on.

DR: Do you still have family that lives in Vietnam?

XT: No, we don't have any so far.

DR: Would you ever go back there?

XT: No I don't think so, at least until now.

DR: Why is that?

XT: The reasons that make my family and I left there still remain now. That's why I don't want to come back there.

DR: Why have you stayed in Holland?

XT: Because I thought this is a nice place to be.

DR: Do you ever plan to move anywhere else in the United States?

XT: No, I don't think so. I have a chance to visit some of my friends who are living in the South side in another state, but then I still plan to live here.

DR: What do you think are the best things about living in Holland?

XT: The best thing in Holland is our society have to try to solve the social problems. If we cleared that problem, I think that's the best for this place--like gangs, like drugs, some social problems. You know that, maybe you're younger than me and you live here, so maybe you know that problem better than I do.

DR: What do you think then are the worst things about living in Holland?

XT: The worst thing I think that is the social problem, too. On the other hand, I think the worst is if our minority groups don't have any chance to build their lives. When those people came over here, they have to rebuild their lives and if they don't have the chance to do that, I think, something wrong will happen to them, like they disappointed and then they don't want to work, don't want to communicate with another group, another people. I think that's not good for strange people who come over here, and of course, that is not good for our town, either.

DR: What changes have you seen here in the last ten years that you've lived here?

XT: What's changed is we have more and more people come to this place. And then when the people come over, they brought with them some social problems, some problems. I mean, more people come over, we have more problems we have to look at. You understand what I

mean? Sometimes I try to explain what I'm thinking, but I don't have enough language to say about it.

DR: What do you think is causing these causing these social problems, or what do you think needs to be done about them?

XT: Right now I see around here two social problems. That is the gangs, and drugs. With the gangs I think our society try to give to them a chance to join, to live with us, give them a chance to learn about education, the good things for a new life. If we give to them the good chance to build their life, so we will help them not to join in that problem. With the drugs, I though, that's a big problem.

DR: I've asked all of my questions. Is there anything else about your experience that I should've asked or that you'd like to share?

XT: My experience about life, or what?

DR: About anything that you think people who will read this interview should know about you.

XT: When we come over here, that means we have a chance to learn from two different cultures. We try to keep the good ones from my own culture. And I learn good ones from the new culture. So my experience is, if you always try to learn the new things, and you do know how to split the good and the bad, and you try to keep it go up and up, try to deal with your life, your family, even your friends, do a good thing. So our place will be better.

DR: Do you think that American people, like myself for instance, should learn or be shown things about your Vietnamese culture?

XT: In my culture, we live basis on family and we work for our next generation. In this country, "self" is first. I really don't want to say which way is better. I think, for your question, my answer is it depends on how much interest someone has to know about my culture. If they do so, I am ready to talk to them all of my knowledge.

DR: Have you found that people are at all interested in learning about you, as coming from Vietnam?

XT: Yes, just some of my friends, they want to know about my culture and the reason why we come over here. We try to explain to them why, and try to introduce them what culture I thought is the best in my old one. And I learn a lot from them. I learn English, I learn American culture, and I learn the way that we treat to another one. Oh, a lot. I learn from everyone every day.

DR: What sorts of things do you do with yourself or with your family in your free time when you're not working or are not busy?

XT: We just stay together and share our time together. Or if I have a little money, I could bring them to go get a dinner in a restaurant or bring them someplace to play. We enjoy it.

DR: I don't have any more questions, but thank you very much for taking the time to do this.

XT: This is a chance to me to talk to another one about my life, my experience, my chance something like that. But, you know, my English language is limited. This means I can't talk everything I want or everything I think. So, if you think that sometime some of my answer is not clear, you could ask me again. And if I can't say, I could write it out.

DR: Good, because I'll type this out and then I'll send a copy back to you. You'll have a chance to look at it and add anything that you want or change anything that isn't how you want it. You'll have a chance to do that. Once when you send that back to me, I'll make your corrections and then I'll send you a final copy and a final copy will stay in the archives. If anyone ever is coming in and is interested in the Vietnamese who live in Holland, they might be able to use and read that interview.

XT: You know that because the major reason between myself and another of my people is we have a different education level. Something probably is right to me, but wrong to another one. Or something is right to them that is wrong to me. So that is hard. These people try to learn something from another one. It's hard for them. Just only some people know how to teach them, could serve them or help them. I'm feeling that I'm not say exactly what I'm thinking, but I'm feeling like that. This paper is good for me, but if you send it to another one, so maybe. I don't know. That

depends on you if you think something I say could help you do something, so go ahead, no problem.

DR: Well, thank you very much.

XT: Oh, no problem, Donna.