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Tran, Kieu Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Interviewee: Kieu Tran  
Interviewer: Rachel Smarszcz  
November 3, 1998

RS: Could you please state your full name?

KT: Kieu T. Tran.

RS: Okay, where and when were you born?

KT: I was born in Vietnam in [date removed], 1981.

RS: And how long did you live there?

KT: I lived there until I was four years old.

RS: Could you tell me a little about your family?

KT: Um, I have one sister. She’s older than me. I have an older brother and I have a younger brother, and I’ve got six adopted brothers and sisters. They’re my cousins and my aunt and uncle died so they lived with us since I was in fifth grade.

RS: What was life like in your hometown and at your home and growing up with so many people?

KT: In Vietnam or in...


KT: I don’t really remember what it was like growing up in Vietnam. All I remember is we lived on a farm in the middle of nowhere. Um, my grandma lived on another farm, like just a mile down the way. And we were the only people in the neighborhood. And, well, two houses that’s our neighborhood. Um, I ate dirt and we basically farmed for a living. We had our farm and my parents dug a well and we lived down there.
And that was all we did. Sometimes she went in the city and sold stuff. My mom went in the city and sold stuff but other than that, we sustained ourselves on the farm.

RS: Was your family active in church in Vietnam?

KT: Not in Vietnam. We didn't go to church. Once in a long while they'd go to the temple which was pretty far away so if it was a special occasion or something they'd go to the temple and visit, but otherwise they didn't go to church.

RS: So what made your family want to leave Vietnam and come here?

KT: We left when I was four years old because my dad wanted a better life for all of us and Vietnam, it was communist. He had escaped a couple of times, he was put in jail because he didn't want to fight the war. He's got a tattoo on his arm right now because of the war. They branded him basically saying you know, if you come back, and we catch you, we're going to put you in jail. So we left because it's communist and he wanted a better life for all of us and there was no way he could have stayed in Vietnam and have been a free man because he had left jail and we left with my aunt and uncle and we left with my sister- most of our family went. My grandma stayed back though.

RS: Did your family have any concerns about leaving?

KT: They were very nervous about leaving. Especially since you weren't allowed to leave. Because it was illegal to leave and if you were caught, you were basically put in jail and I don't know what they would have done to you after that, but it was very risky to leave. We left on a homemade boat and we basically sailed off in the middle of nowhere without knowing where we were going. We just sailed. Um, another concern was somebody had to stay and take care of my grandma. Both grandparents, because
both my of my grandpa, grandfathers died during the war and so there was only my
grandma left and she refused to leave and my other grandma on my dad's side refused
to leave because that was where they were born and they weren't gonna die in another
country. They were so old by then too and they also decided, you know, the rest of our
family's here, we all couldn't leave so they stayed behind and just the fear of being
captured was one of the major concerns. We had to leave in the middle of the night.

RS: Do you remember any of that?

KT: Yeah, um, we left in the middle of the night one night and my mom and my brother
went in a different route. My little brother he was just born, like four months old, he
was just born, and they had to take him a different route because if we all went together
we would have been caught and we would have all gone to jail. My dad wanted to just
risk the chance of us splitting up than all of us getting caught and so, they went a
different route and my dad took me and my sister and my older brother, Thang, Van,
through the woods and he had me on his shoulders and I don't remember what we were
doing but we were running and he was holding my sister's hand and my brother was
just running and we ran and we went to like the clearing right before the edge of the
water and there was like one soldier pacing back and forth and back and forth while we
were sitting there. So we had to duck and we just sat there really quiet for the longest
time, and we just sat and sat and waited until the soldier left and then after that we
got to the boat and we, my mom and my little brother didn't make it. They
didn't come until another hour later and so it was an anxious waiting for them to come.

We had to wait and wait. Were they not going to make it? Are we going to leave
without them or what? You know? My dad would not leave so we waited but then we had like thirty other people that were there on this little crowded homemade boat. So finally they came and we left and we were on the boat for about three days and four nights. We left in the middle of the night, we just sailed and sailed and sailed on this little non-engine kind of, I think it had an engine actually. It was a fishing boat that my uncle, because he was a fisherman. And we sailed out just in the middle of the sea basically, which is like no destination you just sailed. And we were called boat people in the history books. I never knew we were called boat people until I studied American history. Americans called us boat people. And then we sailed for awhile and we saw a bunch of people like pass us really fast on their motor boats. But, we got picked up by a French refugee ship, they picked us up and we went up on the boat and they made me climb the ladder. It was really scary. I wanted, they had my brother in a little sack and they pulled him up. And they made me climb the ladder and I was so scared of heights. I hate heights now. Because they made me climb the ladder up this huge ship like on the side and my dad was, like, right behind me holding me to go up the ladder on the side of the huge ship and the boat just's rocking and going crazy and we're climbing up this ladder and I was so scared. I hated that. I cried. Yeah, so that was it. Do you want me to stop here or...

RS: So how did your family decide to come to the United States rather than another country?

KT: They didn't really decide. It wasn't a choice. Um, we got on the ship and they took us to, I can't remember which one was first. Either Singapore or the Philippines. We
stayed in both refugee camps. There were two refugee camps and both of them for six months each. And we stayed there. And we didn't decide. What happened was my dad changed our last name so it's not really Kieu Tran, it's something else, but he changed our last name so that we'd have the same last name as my cousins and my aunt and uncle. That way we'd stay together. And he did that, and it was just basically luck of the draw. You sit and you wait until you find some sponsors in different places. So my dad has a book of like all of these people who went to different countries, you know. Some people went to France, some people went to Australia. They went to like all these different countries. And we got to go to Grand Rapids, Michigan and my cousins got picked to go to Holland and so we decided that was good. It was only a half an hour drive away, so that's basically how. It wasn't like we want to go to Michigan, take us there, you know. It was just whoever sponsored us.

RS: So, did you have to get a VISA for it?

KT: We didn't. We were considered refugees, so we got sponsored by the Donnahues and then we were sponsored by Walt and we were sponsored by Bob. And they all, collectively as a group, went through and did all of the paperwork and gave us a house to live in, you know. We paid rent. And then my dad got a job from Walt. He still works for him this very day.

RS: What does he do?

KT: He um, does his own little company kind of thing. He-Walt owns a bunch of little apartments and my dad fixes them up for him. He goes through and he does construction. He also has other jobs with other companies too. But that he basically
does that for Walt. And then he has my brothers mow Walt's lawn. All the apartments' lawns in the summer. So, he does that and that's about it.

RS: And what was your first impression of the U.S. when you came here? If you can remember when you were four.

KT: My first impression of the French boat was milk. I remember I hated milk. I threw up on milk on the ship and then they made us go up on the stairway and I was scared of heights because it like overlooked the water and then we had to get Dutch shoes. I don't know why they gave us Dutch shoes on a French ship but they gave us wooden shoes.

RS: And then you end up here in Holland.

KT: Ended up in Grand Rapids, came to school in Holland. Then we came here and I remember going through the airport with like, they gave us presents and that was really nice. The first like night, it was really scary. We were in this little duplex that they stayed in and it was like really late at night. So they gave us the house to stay in, and we basically just spent the night there and they gave us blankets and food and stuff like that. And the house they furnished it all up, but I don't remember much of it. It was just. I remember like, that first night it was kind of like 'ooo, what's all this stuff?' You know? You're used to like dirt. So, you come here and you get carpet. Woah.

RS: So, how did you eventually get here in Holland at Hope College?

KT: I applied last year and I just, my brother goes here and I applied to go to Hope College and got accepted and just decided I wanted to go here because it was so small.

RS: When you guys came here to Michigan, were people pretty accepting to you guys as
immigrants? Do you know?

KT: I really don't remember a lot of it. I remember like our neighbors upstairs were Mexican. So they were pretty cool. The first language we kind of learned was a little bit of Spanish. So, they taught us a little bit of Spanish when we first moved here. They taught us how to swear in Spanish too. They were horrible. And then we went to school, but the school that I went to had a special kind of program and the bus had to come to our house like specifically, they arranged it that way. But the school we went to was in a different district, but they took us there anyway because they had a Vietnamese teacher there who could teach us Vietnamese and she could teach us English too so, she could speak in Vietnamese and teach us English. So that way, we went there. But it wasn't really traumatic or anything because we had a bunch of other like little Vietnamese kids who spoke Vietnamese and understood what we were going through because they were going through the same thing, you know. And I'm still best friends with her. To the very day, since kindergarten. So that's cool.

RS: How do you think that Holland as a community has responded to Asian Americans as being here?

KT: I really don't know. I haven't been here long enough to really know. So, I really can't answer that one. Hope College has been really nice though.

RS: What do you think the best thing about living in Holland is, and what do you like most about it here?

KT: Dorm life. The question doesn't really apply. Because college life, yeah. But I can tell you about Grand Rapids.
RS: Okay.

KT: Um, we lived in like the ghettos of Grand Rapids since I was, till third grade, I think. Well, we moved to California when I was in second grade, but in Grand Rapids we were just, like we lived in just predominately black neighborhood and the people called us Chinks and stuff like that. When I was little I never understood like, what in the heck that meant and they did the eye rolling thing. And I didn't understand what that meant or anything like that. Until I got to, like, high school and we moved to like all-white stuck up Kentwood. And it was just like man, all these people, I think when I was in fourth grade we went to Kentwood and I was the only Asian girl in the whole like elementary school. Me and my sister were like one of the only Asian girls there. It was a little bit, you're so used to being in that atmosphere that you look around at all of the other white kids and you kind of consider yourself white because you don't see the reflection. You know? But you hang out with so many white people then you just kind of blend in like and then you've got the other people who would like make such a big deal out of it and go and call you Chink and harass you. You know? But I felt like, and that I was just really comfortable with my friends and stuff like that. They were really nice, but...

RS: Can you think of any specific event living in Grand Rapids that would be real memorable to you?

KT: Really memorable? Living in Grand Rapids? Um, oh, the one thing that made me really mad. Can I say that?

RS: Yeah.
KT: Was in ninth grade our house got robbed. By some Asian people. And they figured out it was Asian people because the Asian guy was really stupid and he took my brother's driver's license and he like had it changed with his picture on it. He wanted a different picture. He had it changed and then he put his address on it. For like a change of address. They had it because they called back and said, "We want to confirm that you changed your address" and my brother's like "No". And that was the guy who robbed our house. And the police didn't do anything about it. They had his address, they didn't do anything about it. I felt as if they were looking at it like 'here's some Asian people who robbed another Asian person, they deserve it. They're against each other of their own kind. They deserve it'. The police never caught him and he lived there. That was his house. They had his finger prints all over our house. You know? He got like away with like all of our stuff, I was so mad, you know? If it was, like, an Asian person robbing a white person's house, oh yeah. They'd be like down the door, put you in jail, and never let you out. But, I felt like they were looking at it like. And even, they had so much evidence. You know? They had like all of this stuff, but they looked at it like Asian person robs an Asian person's house. They're doing it to your kind. You deserve it. That made me so mad. They never caught him. And they had his address. We like came to his house. I'm like...

RS: You went to his house?

KT: Yeah, my brothers went to, I wasn't going to go. I'm like fine, get a gun and shoot me around our house. That made my brothers mad. So they went to his house. He never did anything though, so... That was the one memory of Kentwood that I was so mad.
RS: Who were your friends when you first came to America?

KT: They were all Asian. My best friend Yen, she came, I think she came a year or so before I did. But, she was from Vietnam too.

RS: That's your best friend now?

KT: Yeah, well she was one of my best friends. But, she came from Vietnam but she was mixed. She was like half Chinese and half Vietnamese, but she came from there and she spoke Vietnamese and I had like a group of six friends that were just Asians when I was little because we were in the little accelerated ESL: English as a Second Language thing. But, and then as I moved out of Grand Rapids, we had different friends. So I was just, we went to Kentwood and it was all white. So I had white friends. It wasn't a big deal or anything like that?

RS: Does your family still keep in touch with your friends and the rest of your family that's back in Vietnam?

KT: Yep. They call them once in a long while and they usually just send them money because they're really poor there. Um, my mom's been back twice. My dad's been back twice, I think. My sister and brothers, they've each been back once. My cousins, and then I'm going back next summer to visit. So, it should be fun.

RS: You haven't been there since you were four?

KT: I haven't been there since I was four. I'm kind of nervous. Pooping in the woods. My sister went there and she was sick for two weeks. So, I'm kind of nervous, but kind of anxious. You know? Third world country. They poop in the woods. They don't have like running water or anything so they have to go down to the thing and get it. They
like, to protect their house, they have somebody sit in the front of it and watch it all
day long. Because people come by and rob it. So they like wooden stoves and they're
in like dirt floor. In the kitchen, it's still dirt floor. They just like rebuilt their house
so it's kind of like ceramic or tiled. But it's not like dirt anymore but it used to be.
And then they still have a kitchen part that hasn't been, like we don't have gas or
anything like that. So they have just like the wooden stove and stuff like that. I'm kind
of nervous.

RS: In what ways do you think that your life has been changed by your family's decision to
come here?

KT: I think it's completely changed. Like, I know for sure it would be so much different if
I was in Vietnam right now. If I was in Vietnam, I don't think I would be going to
college. I know I'd probably go to school, but not to college. Because it costs so much
money and they don't give you scholarships or anything there. Like my cousin, he's
trying to get into college right now and he can't do it. Because we don't have enough
money. Um, I know, and since I'm a girl, I know I definitely wouldn't be. Because I'd
probably be married right now. Like the rest of my cousins. Probably be married and
probably be like having kids and just working on a farm, and that's what they're all
doing back there. And I know that I wouldn't know what in the heck. They have
T.V.s back there but not really be used to that. They have phones back there, but they
have to go down to the city to use it. It would be so different. I think I would be like
part of those statistics that you see on T.V. that's kind of like. You know, look at these
people, we need to help them. That'd be me. So, that would be like me now. Help
give me some scholarships. But, yeah, I'd be like working on the farm and doing all that stuff and I am so thankful that they decided to come here. Because there are so many more opportunities here and I think that's why a lot of the Asian people come here, like knowing what they had to put through there and that's why they're like more counting on their kids to do good in school. Like, growing up I always had to have like good grades. I always had to have like 4.0. Always had to like just schoolwork, schoolwork, schoolwork. If I had homework, and I had to work that day, there was no compromise. My mom would call my boss, "My daughter's not going to work today, she has work to do." And that's it. So, it was nice. Mom, call in for work. So, total change.

RS: So you think your family would have made the same decision all over again?

KT: Oh yeah. Yeah. Definitely. Even with all the risks. All the risks of being put in jail and stuff like that. Yeah. Yeah. Because my dad, when I was born, like he wasn't there. He was in the jungles just, he fled. He like left jail basically and he stayed in the jungles for about a year and a half or so just living off of, like he just lived in the jungle for a year. He like killed animals and just like he was like primitive man.

RS: What did your dad do there?

KT: When he was there? He was like a rebel. My aunt, and my mom tells me that he was the kid that everybody was just scared of. He would go and steal their chicken and eat it. And he would just do crazy things like that. And people were just like, he wouldn't do it out of like, just to be spiteful or just to be like a bratty little kid. He'd do it because it was like life or death kind of thing. He would like steal people's chicken or
steal their bread or whatever. And that was how he survived. You know? He like attended to the farm and did all that stuff, but basically he wanted to go on his own. He wanted to make money. He made all of this money to buy a motorcycle and he couldn't have it because my grandma said no. Because he was so bad. And he just ended up like, he lived in, he's a really smart man. He never went to school. He went up to third grade. And that was it, but he was like, he taught himself how to read in English and write in English and then he knows how to read and write in Vietnamese. And then he, he just, he's really motivated because he lived in the jungle and that really, I'm just really proud of him. Because of all the stuff he tells me. He's crazy.

RS: If you had to say one thing about yourself that you would want people to know about you or you would want to be remembered by, what would that be?

KT: I would just want people to know who I am and I'm representing more myself and not really trying to represent like the whole Asian community as a whole because that's a big shoe to fill. You know? But, just more of me as myself and trying to better myself and better my family. You know? Trying to get things going and just to prove people wrong that we can do it. You know?

RS: Is there anything else that you want to add?

KT: There isn't really anything that I can think of. That's about it. Unless you have anymore questions.

RS: No, I think that's about it. Thank you very much.

KT: You're welcome.