SPECIAL FEATURE INTRODUCTION

The following contributions are based on interviews conducted by freshmen student authors with Asian American immigrants who are family members or close friends of the writer. The narratives describe the experiences and opinions of six Asian Americans and their motivation to leave their home country.

There has been some debate in academia over the value of oral history. Questions often arise how personal biases as well as memory affect these accounts. The ability to verify the information in personal recollections is also an issue that historians face. However, the historical developments discussed in these pieces – Japanese internment camps, communism, the war in Vietnam and the subsequent refugee crisis – are well documented and can be easily researched. These experiences provide invaluable evidence of the impact that historical events have on individuals that stands in stark contrast to the detached accounts often presented in textbooks.

The first story follows Masao Yamashita, who was raised in an American interment camp during World War II. The author relates Yamashita's experience in America as he struggled with his Japanese and American heritage. Kyaw Lin Tun's mother faced hardships as an upper class adolescent during the socialist reform in Myanmar and her subsequent immigration to the United States. Following this are three stories about the lives of Thomas Tran, To Phan and Su and Mai Thai that fled South Vietnam in the aftermath of the war in Vietnam. In each case, the interviewees express their determination to maintain traditions while attempting to adjust to American culture. The experiences of Chinese Americans are the focus of the final narrative. Yuchang Huang also articulates the common theme of continued love for his country of birth and heritage, but acknowledges that he is just as American now as anyone born here.

According to 2000 Census data, Asian Americans accounted for 4.2 percent of the U.S. population, and 12.3 percent of Californians. These six oral histories highlight the influence that immigration has had on American history. *Perspectives* would like to thank Professor Ping Yao for providing the essays selected for this special feature from her course on Asian American History (HIST 150).

MASAO YAMASHITA

David Ko

Masao Yamashita was born in Kyushu, Japan, on August 20, 1934. His parents immigrated to Rocksprings, Wyoming, shortly after he was born. In 1936, they established a boarding house that catered to Japanese bachelors who were working in the mines. Life for Masao was relatively pleasant. However, on February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which ordered all people of Japanese ancestry into military internment. ”I saw many flyers and posters on every streetlight and billboard in our town,” Masao recalled. ”My parents said that we had to move to a new home that the government made for us. I was happy to move to a new home, but that night my mother cried all night.” Masao and his family were given two weeks to prepare for relocation. ”My parents tried to sell the boarding house but no one wanted to deal with them. In the end, we had to leave behind everything we couldn’t carry. At night I could hear my father yelling at my mother that he would rather burn down the house than let a white man take it after they left. By the end of the two weeks several military trucks came to town and we were herded like cattle into the trucks.”

The U.S. Army interned 110,000 men, women, and children in ten remote camps. Due to the hurried nature of relocating so many people so quickly, the American government did not have adequate time to set up internment camps. The best solution was to hold many Japanese Americans in temporary areas until the camps were completed. To Masao’s surprise, the military trucks stopped at a racetrack in San Francisco. The temporary camp was surrounded with barbed wire and armed guards.

> We were ordered to stay inside the racetrack and not to try to escape. There were guards everywhere and my parents told me not to stare at them or they’ll hurt me. We were allowed to walk around the racetrack and they gave us food, but during the night we were forced to sleep inside the horse stalls and they gave us straw mattresses to sleep on. A

> few weeks later they came and gave us cotton mattresses, and after about four months a train took us to Topaz.

The first internees were moved into Topaz, Utah, in September 1942. At its peak, Topaz held 9,408 people in barracks of tarpaper and wood. “When my family arrived at the camp we were housed in a long bungalow structure with other families. It was very difficult for my sisters because there was very little privacy and it was a very difficult period of adjustment for me and my family.” It was at this point in his life that Masao began to develop mixed feelings toward his Japanese heritage. “I didn’t know why this was happening to us. People treated us differently only because we were Japanese. I didn’t start this war. I didn’t even fight against America in this war, but just because I was Japanese they were treating me like I was the enemy.” Masao refused to attend the Japanese school at the internment camp. “At that time I didn’t want to learn Japanese. I didn’t want to learn about Japan. I wish Japan never bombed Pearl Harbor. I just wanted things to be normal again and get out of that camp.” Slowly Masao began retreating from social events and spending more time pondering his own personal and cultural identity. He began a friendship with one of the American guards, who would brought him books by American authors. He told Masao stories about his service in the United States Army. “I was happy that this soldier talked to me like a human being and didn’t look down on me because I was Japanese. He would tell me that in the Army they don’t care what color you are as long as you were fighting with them.”

For two years and six months, Masao’s resentment towards his Japanese identity slowly kindled and his resentment began leading to violent conflicts with his family.

> I remember this one night my father asked me why I didn’t go to Japanese school like all the other children and I told him that I didn’t want to go because I don’t care about Japan. He had never hit me before, but that night my father beat me senseless. I was bedridden for a week and my mother took care of me. She would tell me, ‘Masao your father loves you but you must not anger him. You are Japanese, we are Japanese, we must be together.’ It only made me angrier.

After the beating, Masao receded further his bitterness towards the Japanese. “I was so mad that my family and I were being treated so badly; all because of this war the Japanese started. We lost everything because of them, but there was no one that I could talk to, no one that wanted to listen to me.”

By October 1945, the Topaz internment camp was closed down. Masao and his family were allowed to move to Salt Lake City, 150 miles away.

> The news of the defeat of Japan spread really quickly and we were told by the soldiers that the government would release us soon and that we should start packing our belongings. I didn’t know what to think at the time. I was happy we were finally leaving. I just wanted to get out and have everything back to normal again.

Soon after moving to Salt Lake City, Masao’s life was in turmoil once again. “My mother divorced my father three months after we left Topaz. She packed some clothes and took our youngest sister with her. She never told us where she was going. I didn’t hear from my sister for almost ten years.” The normal life that Masao had dreamed about for the previous two years dissolved almost overnight. “I was left with just my father and my brother. My three other sisters got married very shortly after and left with their husbands to different cities. My father worked as a gardener and began to drink heavily.”

Luckily, Masao was able to find some normalcy while attending high school in Salt Lake City.

> I had fun in high school. There were only a few Japanese or even Asian students at my school and the other kids treated me like a regular person. School was the one thing that actually kept me happy at the time. I even dated a white girl for a little bit. It wasn’t anything serious, but I began to feel that things were going the right way for me now.

After graduating high school Masao recalled the conversations he had with the solider during his time in Topaz, and contemplated enlisting in the military.

> I remember what the soldier told me at camp and when I saw that the military offered a GI Bill I made my mind up right then and

> there that I would enlist. I had no money after high school so I couldn't apply to college so I thought that this was the best opportunity for me to go and travel and when I got back I could get a higher education.

Masao enlisted, in the Air Force, and after boot camp he was stationed in Japan for two years. When I discussed how he had felt going back to the homeland that had caused him so much personal turmoil he simply said, "[b]y then I didn't consider myself Japanese at all. When I was stationed in Japan I didn't try to go out and explore the country. I spent most of my time at the Air Force base and with my free time I would just hang out with my friends in the barracks." Asked if he had considered marrying a native Japanese girl, he replied, "Not one bit. I never put any serious thought to marrying a girl in Japan. For me it was like I was on vacation in a foreign country."

After completing his military obligations, Masao moved to Los Angeles, and with the money he received from the G.I. Bill he was able to bring his father and brother to California to live with him. In Los Angeles, Masao attended a technical trade school and after graduation he applied for a job at the Los Angeles County printing press. Masao said that he never had any problems with racism or discrimination in his work life. In a series of fortunate events, Masao was also able to meet up with one of his female high school classmates named Yumi who had moved to Los Angeles a year prior to Masao.

> My uncle was living in the Los Angeles area and he had invited me to go have dinner with him and a special friend that he was bringing. I knew that this would be an introduction of some sort to a girl that he wanted me to see. Little did I know that this girl was an ex-classmate of mine that I knew in Utah. I didn't take it very seriously.

By the following year Masao married Yumi. With the help of the G.I. Bill, they purchased a house in the San Fernando Valley.

> After I got married and moved to the valley I thought that my life was finally going in the right direction. We had two children, one son and one daughter, and I was the happiest father in the world. One reason I moved to the valley was to get away from the Japanese community and to start a new life. I didn't want to send

my children to Japanese school; I just wanted them to live a normal life.

Masao is currently one of the volunteer curators at the Japanese National Museum in Little Tokyo, downtown Los Angeles. He retired three years ago from his job with the Los Angeles County printing press and spends about five hours a day at the museum giving tours and sharing his personal experiences. When I asked Masao how he feels about his experiences and how they contribute to his definition of being an Asian-American he simply replied, "I am an American. I love America. There is no other place that I would rather be."

KYAW LIN TUN'S MOTHER

Kyaw Lin Tun

My mother grew up in Mandalay, a large city in Myanmar. Her living conditions back in Mandalay weren't bad because her father was wealthy. They had a massive two-story house and all the neighbors that walked by admired it. Her father was well known throughout the community, and their home was known as Mr Leather's house (U Maung Ko's house.) "He was a very hard working man," she told me. Her father owned a leather factory that manufactured high quality leather that was exported to India, Germany, China and Malaysia. At one point, her father had over three hundred men working for him.

In Mandalay, the street where she lived was lined with small stores that sold mostly Burmese snacks such as preserved fruits, in a special sauce, soda and seeds. The small pharmacy would sell herbs and medicine and sometimes tried to imitate Western names. Meat stores were buzzing with people and flies. An occasional carriage pulled by horses would pass by the house, where on many nights the whole family sat outside, in a group, and because the humidity and heat were unbearable inside. Mandalay lies almost directly on the equator. During the summer, temperatures often exceed 100 degrees on a cool day and many deaths occur because of heat waves. My mom said as a little girl, her older brother took them all over town due to their wealth. She said they owned three different cars, a Mercedes, a truck, and the Jeep that they used to travel with.

However, my mom's nice life came to an end as the country fell into chaos after the 1962 military coup led by General U Ne Win who began to rule the country with an iron fist. His method of socialism meant that all property belonged to the government and all wealth was claimed and redistributed among the citizens. My mom was a teenager at the time but she remembers clearly the day he took power. People protested in the streets. The protesters were shot with rubber bullets and targeted with high-powered water hoses that pushed people back. Her brothers drove their expensive foreign cars away from the property when the military came to occupy the factory and claim it for the government. They came with machine guns strapped and took my grandfather away for questioning. Since my grandfather was a wealthy man, he was perceived as a risk due to his resources. My mother was left behind weeping and screaming for her father. Her father didn't cry, he was such a strong man, and told her calmly, "I will be back." Indeed, they released him a few days later. He was among the innocent in a crowed cell. They interrogated him and ask him questions about possessions such as jewelry and precious material.

A few days later, the army came by the house and took everything that was valuable. The family was left with a few diamonds that he had intended to give his wife and daughters. Luckily, he had hidden the diamonds in the basement. My mother recalled that, "the soldiers ripped through the house throwing our things around, breaking our furniture." My mom was trying to stop them and telling them to be gentle with the things but she was shoved aside. After that incident, her father fell into depression and turned to drugs to suppress his anger, frustration and helplessness. He became addicted to drugs and about two years after the takeover, he passed away. My mom, as the youngest of her siblings, was greatly saddened by her father's death. She couldn't stop thinking about all the important life events her father would miss, such as her wedding day.

My mom and dad did not met until about one week before their wedding. It was an arranged marriage, which was very common in those days. Her aunt served as the matchmaker and arranged the terms with my dad's side. My mom said she was very unhappy about the arrangement. She felt like she was being forced to marry someone that she had never met and didn't know if she was going to love. My mother was in love with another man who eventually became a doctor. Her family disapproved of him because he was of a different religion. Since she did not want to bring any shame to her family, she broke off the relationship.

She said the first time she met my dad, she didn't like him, although he was nice to her.

My dad also came from a wealthy family that used to work for the government before the Socialists took over. She said, "They were like the IRS (Internal Revenue Service) here, not very nice people but wealthy and respected, just like us. His father was the chief of that office, but he lost his position." They got married and a year later after I was born, they decided to move to Singapore. Her father in-law had started a company there and business seemed to be improving. He needed his son's help and wanted my mom to do the cooking and cleaning around the office. We lived in the attic throughout my childhood. By this time, Myanmar was still in chaos, people were protesting on the streets everyday, getting arrested and treated with brutality for opposing the government. Everything was peaceful in Singapore, and my mom said with a sigh, "I didn't have to worry about your safety or worry about your father getting arrested for protesting." Ten years went by, during which she toiled away in the kitchen, serving her husband, her father-in-law, the clients that came to the office and at the same time making sure that I was fed and went to school. Things finally changed for her as the business went bankrupt, and the bank repossessed the office that they had paid half a million dollars for.

It was around this time that she persuaded my dad to find a new place to go to because she did not want to return to Myanmar. Even though her family was there, she did not want to go back due to the violence there. My father wrote a letter to a childhood friend who had settled in America and was doing well as an engineer. His friend would turn out to be our savior. He talked my parents into leaving for the U.S. and promise that he would take care of everything. My mom was willing to take the risk of going to a strange far away land that she knew nothing about and we boarded a plane to Los Angeles, California. My mom said, "[j]ust a couple of months after we landed here, the September 11 attacks occurred and that really scared me. I thought to myself, we escaped all the violence in Myanmar and I didn't want to see any more people getting killed." The economy declined as a result of the terrorist attacks. My mom and dad couldn't get jobs, and they were using the money they had brought to pay for rent and food and my schooling, but the money was disappearing fast. Finding a job wasn't as easy as they had thought. Degrees from Burmese universities, were not recognized here unless my parents went back to college and got an American degree. They were in their late forties and even though they could speak English, they were not

fluent. It was difficult for them to go back to a university here since they lacked funds to pay for tuition and our living expenses. Luckily, my mom, who is a very social person, made a lot of friends very quickly among the Burmese community here and that led to work opportunities. My parents both went to work at the same place, in a lab where they processed medication. They served as assistants to their Burmese friend even though they had college degrees. The friend that helped them to get these jobs had earned an American college degree.

My mom kept applying to different places and she finally landed a job at 3M Unitek, a major company that produces medical supplies. She started as a temporary worker and since it was a factory, the work was hard. “You had to be fast, there was a certain number of items you had to finish checking or the boss got very mad at you and started yelling. And since I didn’t speak English very well, I didn’t know how to talk back. I just nodded my head and said yes boss.”

All of this was a real transformation for my mom. As the daughter of a wealthy factory owner, who lived in luxury when she was younger and, now in her late forties, she had to work in a factory making barely a little more than minimum wage. “The supervisors know that Asians work hard and they won’t complain no matter how much work they get, so they make them work even harder.” She says that Asians have to work harder than most other races, in 3M Unitek, mainly because of their docile personalities and not being able to speak fluent English to communicate with their supervisors.

> America has its good and bad just like any other country. If you work hard here, more than likely you will become successful; it is fair in that sense. I don’t hate this country because we come from a different part of the world and different cultures, so the way things work here is not the same as back home. Back in Myanmar, we lived like royalty, nobody looked down on us or discriminated against us, we were respected people especially because my father was a successful businessman. But what can we do? Things happen that are beyond our control. If I didn’t have any children I would go back to Burma, just to be with my family. But if I go back to Burma and take you with me, your future would be ruined because there is no future there but drugs. So we started here from scratch and struggle and put up with the people here. But not everyone is bad; I have met a lot of nice people who have helped me a lot at work. We are old and it is too late for us to take advantage of the

> opportunities this country has to offer. But you are a young man, and if you work hard you will be successful and it will make our sacrifice and hard work worth it, even if you get married and forgot about us, I will be happy for you.

My mom tries hard to preserve Burmese culture. She cooks all the traditional foods on the Burmese holidays and as Americanized as I am, I wouldn't trade what she cooks for any American food. We still speak to each other in Burmese and watch Burmese shows and movies that we order from Burma. We attend Burmese festivals and social gatherings every year to keep that Burmese culture. She identifies herself as a Burmese immigrant. She feels she is just here for my sake and not to be an American citizen. But she does blend in the American culture especially recently. She buys a Christmas tree because she likes the smell of it and likes to decorate it and she wakes up early on Black Friday morning to go stand in line for the shopping madness. She loves to shop and her taste in clothes has definitely shifted to the western fashion. She frequents Macy's and Nordstrom, her two favorite stores. She tries to improve her English by watching shows on TV even though she doesn't really like American shows. She talks to me in Burmese most of the time because she has a hard time understanding the English spoken by younger people. She lives with my dad in Temple City, California.

THOMAS TRAN

Ha Van

Thomas Tran is Chinese-Vietnamese and he has lived in the U.S. for nearly thirty years. He is 45 years old and lives in Alhambra, California with his wife and two daughters. Tran was born in 1964 in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) in Vietnam. He is the fifth child in a family of nine siblings, four brothers and five sisters. He works as an accountant for Union Bank.

My uncle Thomas was a Vietnamese refugee who was forced to flee his homeland. His family did not have enough food to eat and his father's government job salary was not enough to provide for the family. In 1978, he left Vietnam when he was only fifteen years old. He was the

first child to come to the U.S. in order to escape communism and poverty. His parents had to borrow money from relatives to pay for a seat on a fishing boat. The family wanted my uncle to have a brighter future and a better education in America, so that one day he would be able to help them escape Vietnam. Attempting to leave was a risky enterprise from the start, in part, because people who claimed they could get Thomas onto a boat to flee the country had tricked the family in the past. And the punishment for fleeing was harsh.

Unfortunately my uncle did get caught escaping the country by the Viet Cong, and they sent him to an education camp at Bac Lieu, in Ca Mau province, to do hard labor in the rise fields, digging the dirt, and carrying water by a pole on his shoulders for the whole day. At night, the only food they ate was sesame with rice and water. In order to get out, family members turned everywhere to find money to bribe the police officers. When families went to visit their loved ones, they could only speak Vietnamese, and the police searched their belongings. Some of the prisoners died in the camps from suffering long hours of labor, and their families had no idea that they had passed away because the officers never notified them. They were only told not to visit their family member anymore.

After six months in prison, the government invalidated his registration as a permanent resident and Tran was no longer a citizen of Vietnam. My grandmother encouraged him to try to flee again. For his second attempt to escape Vietnam, Tran had to travel from Saigon to the coast. From there, he and a group of refugees rented a house in a village and waited until midnight. Then they snuck out quietly to board a fishing boat. He estimates that about three hundred people were on the fishing boat, and the boat sailed for one day and one night to an island. During the journey, people on the boat were robbed three times by Thai pirates. Uncle Thomas laughed and said, “I remembered at first I was so happy … I thought they came to rescue us because they gave us sugar canes and other food to eat. Then suddenly, they told us to give them all of our belongings and precious jewelry. Fortunately, no one was killed and the women were not raped by the pirates.”

Uncle Thomas sailed to La Bi Dzong (painful) island, in Malaysia. There was nothing to eat nor was there shelter for the boat people. Nevertheless, the island became a refuge camp place for many new Vietnamese people fleeing their country. While he was waiting at the camp for someone to sponsor him to be able to go to the United States, he would write a letter home once a month. His family treasured these letters,

especially because they had no other proof that he was alive. After living at the Malaysian refugee camp for nearly one year, an American Christian church that brought him to the U.S.

He arrived in Long Island, New York, where he met his first American foster parents. Teenage refugees could choose either to live independently or to be placed with foster parents to take care of them. Although his foster parents had adopted two other Asian children before him, my uncle was the first teenage refugee they took in. He did not know how to communicate with his foster parents and the most challenging situation for him was speaking English. His American parents tried their best to teach him the new language by posting English words everywhere in their house from the kitchen to the garage. They would ask him to pronounce a word, such as refrigerator, and then showed him how to spell it. To this day, his foster parents are the kindest people whom my uncle has ever met in the U.S. because they accepted him for who he was and understood his situation. His foster parents never treated him like a stranger or alien, and instead took care of him as their own child. The foster parents wrote a letter back to Vietnam to his parents, and told them about his life in the U.S. Every time they sent a letter, they mentioned how much he missed his parents, and that he was waiting for the day when his whole family could reunite in America.

Uncle Thomas went to high school soon after his arrival. The education system back then did not provide any ESL courses for new refugee students, thus his lack of English language skills became a barrier to his assimilation. Although the school had some teacher aides from Hong Kong to help with translations in the class, it was still difficult to communicate and follow lectures in the classroom because refugee students were taking regular courses with native English speakers. In order to improve his education, my uncle received help from teachers, who were willing to tutor him and other refugee students. To develop his English language skills, he would try his best to speak English with his American family, watch the news, and read simple English books (Longman version). Eventually he succeeded and he managed to earn a B.A. from a college in Long Island.

In school, he experienced some discrimination from American students because of his accent and Asian features. American students mocked him and his Asian refugee friends with racist jokes about their allegedly small eyes. Based on watching Bruce Lee movies, white students thought that all Asians knew martial arts often challenged my uncle and other Asians to fight. Another stereotype was the idea of Asians

as a “role model” minority, or smart group minority, which my uncle thought put undue pressure on Asian people. Uncle Thomas was also very insulted when Asians were stereotyped as people who only want to stay on welfare and are too lazy to learn English. Many of the young refugees around my uncle joined gangs and engaged in illegal activities such as drug dealing and shootings in the neighborhood. For the first generation like my uncle, it was often difficult to overcome his low self-esteem and to get back self-confidence as a new arrival.

As an Asian in America and as a member of an Asian family, he knew that he had to help the rest of his family back home after he succeeded in reaching the U.S. because his life here was so much better than life for the family back in Vietnam. His family sacrificed quite a lot of money and gold to purchase a seat on a boat for him to escape. After he left, members of his family were threatened and pressured by the government. He realized that he owed them a huge debt, which can hardly be repaid. During his journey to America, he was never angry at his parents’ decision to send him off because he knew it was for his own good.

My uncle grew up in a family where both sons and daughters were educated and both were expected to do the same chores around the house. In his childhood, he had to do everything for himself from ironing clothes, buying groceries, taking care of other siblings, cooking, and fixing things in the house. Since uncle Thomas has only daughters here in the U.S., he expects them to study as much as possible, so they would be independent and respected, and not rely too much on men or a husband to support them. He wants them to pursue their goals. As a result of his parents’ influence, there is no such thing as gender prejudice in the family. Uncle Thomas believes education is the only way to be successful and education is not something anyone can buy with money.

He always remembered his auntie’s words, “if you get an education by knowing how to read and write, you will not have to suffer as a result of being tricked by other people, and you will live a much more comfortable life as reward for having a degree, and you will have not be controlled by other people.” To this day, my uncle spends most of his free time reading books, newspapers, or reading to his daughters, or taking them to the libraries.

While living with his foster parents for eight years, he missed his family and friends in Vietnam. He felt that living with people of his own ethnicity gave him a sense of a belonging because he could communicate more easily and speak the same language without any trouble or barrier.

Since my grandmother wanted him to marry someone from his own ethnicity group, he married a Chinese woman. He did not really mind whether his wife was from another ethnic group, as long as they were able to communicate and felt comfortable around each other. As a son of his generation, he could not disobey his mother's wishes because it would have been considered disrespectful to the elder in the Asian family.

Since he experienced the American family life, he is a mixture of Chinese-Vietnamese and American. Although he was born in Vietnam, he is not ethnically Vietnamese. He considers himself a Chinese-Vietnamese-American. His diverse identity is important to him in knowing where he came from and who he is. My uncle went to private school and can speak and write in Chinese, Vietnamese, and French. The funny thing about my uncle is when he speaks with his siblings and family, he accidentally often mixes all three languages. Some of us joke about him doing it on purpose as a secret code to make it difficult to understand him.

Uncle Thomas likes to live in California to preserve his cultural practices because a majority of Asians, such as Koreans, Japanese, Vietnamese and Chinese live in the Los Angeles area. He finds all different types of Asian food here and buys groceries in Vietnamese and Chinese supermarkets around Monterey Park and the San Gabriel Valley. He enjoys celebrating Tet or Chinese New Year even though the holiday is not similar to the traditional festivities in Vietnam. He maintains some of the traditions by giving out red envelopes, eating dumplings or sticky rice, and visiting relatives to wish them a lucky year. He also quickly adopted American cultural practices from his foster parents. They taught him how to greet people in the American way, to be friendly to others, and to help neighbors when they are in need. He learned how to celebrate holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, July Fourth, etc. Christmas was especially important to him. Every year he wrote Christmas cards and sent them to his relatives, including his foster parents, who lived in another state. He cooked traditional American food like ham or turkey in addition to Chinese and Vietnamese food to celebrate American holidays.

Uncle Thomas said that America is a country with an immense diversity of cultures and ethnic groups, but Americans do not live together in the same community. Instead, they have their own separate, individual, and ethnic and racial communities. Asian Americans are labeled as a "model minority" because they often pursue educational opportunities. Most first generation Asian immigrants often settled in ghettoes or their own communities, such as Monterey Park and Alhambra. They wanted to

find job opportunities and speak their native language instead of assimilating to American culture. Many of them tried to adapt by going to Catholic or Christian church on weekends.

Interviewing my uncle, Thomas Tran, helped me to explore the life experiences of an Asian American in the U.S. The lessons also gave me a comprehensive account of being an American citizen.

TO PHAN

Brian Phan

Gunshots are heard everywhere, announcing the deaths of innocent civilians. People run for the lives as the echo of bombs is ringing in their ears. A mother screams in agony as she witnesses the death of her children before her eyes. This was life in Vietnam during the Vietnam War, and my father experienced all of it. His life is filled with these nightmares and horrors that most people never experience. My father was born on August 20, 1947 and he is now 62 years old. He is the first of his family to come to America only to confront the hardships that got him to get to where he is today. Although he is older, he still works hard and continues to provide for our family.

Growing up in Vietnam, my dad lived in the poor, jungle areas of Hue located between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. My father went to school and studied like any other child growing up in Vietnam. During his childhood, my dad loved to play soccer, and every day after school, he would play with his fellow classmates. Even today, my dad is a devoted soccer fan and watches games when he has free time. Since his home was right next to the river, my dad loved spending his time fishing with the other children. Not only was fishing a source of enjoyment, it also provided food for the family to eat. When I questioned my father about why he doesn't fish any more, his response was that he would love to, but he doesn't have the equipment or the money to buy it. I told him that one day we will go fishing and he can teach me everything he knows.

My dad was the youngest in his family. He had two older brothers and two older sisters, for a total of five siblings. In Vietnam and other Asian countries, it was very common for families to have many children. In America, it is different because it is a lot harder to raise and support a

large family. Even though he was the youngest, he worked just as hard as his older brothers and sisters. He did chores around the house, brought water from the river to the house, and took care of his parents. He said that growing up he had to do hard work all the time, as opposed to my generation of children in America who typically play video games. He also said that the kids in Vietnam had to do everything out of respect for their parents.

As time passed, conflict began between North and South Vietnam. Due to communism, Vietnam was divided into two sides, with the South pushing for democracy and the North supporting communism. In 1968, all men were called upon to fight in the war and my dad was forced to fight against the communists. He witnessed innocent people dying in front of his eyes and families that lost everything. Fighting in the Vietnam War has scarred him for life. To this day, he doesn't forgive himself for hurting other people. He told me that the Vietnamese are peaceful people and do things for one another. The Vietnam War broke that tradition of peace. During his years in combat, he slowly moved up the ranks, eventually becoming a lieutenant after four years of service. As an officer, he became a valued soldier and led battles against the Viet Cong. My dad became a Vietnam War hero and was honored for his bravery.

One of the key factors in the war was U.S. aid for South Vietnam. My father believed that if it had not been for American assistance, a lot more South Vietnamese soldiers would have died. Americans brought supplies and instilled fear into the North Vietnamese soldiers. Although the United States aided South Vietnam for many years, they retreated in 1975 and South Vietnam eventually lost the war. My father believes that if the Americans had continued to help the South Vietnamese, Vietnam would not be the communist country it is today. Soon after the communist victory, my dad was captured and imprisoned. They placed him and many other soldiers in camps far away from any civilization, deep in the mountain ranges. These camps were placed hundreds of miles away so that if anyone escaped, it would be impossible for them to return home.

Life there was horrible and the prisons were far worse than those here in America. Thousands of Vietnamese prisoners were forced to work for the communists. My father worked in the fields, planting crops, cutting down trees, and building houses for the communists to live in. He told me that at times he felt like giving up and dying because life was not worth living if he had to deal with all the suffering. He witnessed many of his fellow soldiers and friends die from starvation; prisoners beaten by guards for entertainment; and prisoners that were shot for not following

orders. My father told me a story about how he and his friends were cutting down trees near the riverbank. At some point, they saw a frog along the river and began to chase it. They chased it because they were so hungry and it was the only source of food that they had seen in days. This is the reality of war; and he hopes that his family will never experience the hardships and evil destruction of war.

While I was interviewing my dad, my mother demanded that I included her in my essay. During the time that my father was in prison, my mother also played an important role in the war effort. She was a nurse and worked in a hospital every day. She was there so much that she lived at the hospital while caring for patients. Everyday she would have to care for hundreds of wounded soldiers to nurse them back to health, so that they could go back to their families. My mother specialized in heart readings and was able to detect heart problems simply by taking a pulse. She learned this skill over four years while working at the hospital. She was praised by many patients and detected several heart problems before it was too late.

By the time my father was released from prison, the war had taken a huge toll on everyone. He had been in the camp for seven years. During this time, Ronald Regan became president of the United States and he allowed prisoners of the Vietnam War to come to America. My parents received the opportunity of a lifetime, and in 1991 took a plane and arrived in Houston, Texas. At that time my sister was four years old and I was an eight- month old baby. Later, we moved to California because my dad had friends here.

Curious, I asked why we were the only ones that could come over. My dad's response was that only soldiers that were imprisoned and fought alongside the Americans could come over. Due to immigration laws, his sister and brothers were not allowed to come over and we were all alone in America.

Many people tried to escape communist rule after the war. There were many stories of people that tried to escape by boat, only to drift off at sea. Many of them risked everything just so they could come over to America. These "boat people" would often die at sea from starvation or disease. My dad also emphasized how pirates would take advantage of these stranded boats to rob refugee of their meager possessions. The people who traveled by boat hoped that they would land in a country nearby where someone would rescue them and bring them to the United States.

Even though he misses his family back in Vietnam, he feels that he will never go to visit. When asked why, he simply stated that because we left such a bad place, he had no desire to go back. Even though Vietnam is his home, it is also a memory that my father wants to forget.

I also asked him more personal questions about his life in America and being an Asian American. My father told me that the main problem he has had is language. Although we have lived here for almost twenty years, my dad's English is still very poor. Upon arriving in America, he wanted to adapt to this new lifestyle, but found it hard communicating with Americans. While I was growing up, my dad would attend English classes in local community centers. These centers would help immigrants learn English and teach them American history. These classes were very difficult for him and even though he practiced English daily, it was still very hard for him to become proficient. He finally stopped taking classes because the classes interfered with his work and time at home with his family. He decided that he would rather work hard and care for his family, so that one day they might be successful and complete the dreams that he could not.

As the interview continued, I asked him how important education is to him. He glared at me because I already knew that answer. To my dad, education is the greatest thing any human being can receive. You can be poor and living in the streets or rich and living in a mansion, but if you are educated, none of that really matters. He told me that we came to America because it was a place where anyone can be whatever he wants to be. Because of this, he strives to provide his family the best opportunity for education that we can possibly have.

People assume Asians are very smart people and always excel in academics, but really the only reason why Asians excel is because of the strict emphasis on education that our parents enforce in us. My father tells me that school always comes first. If he had the chance to go to school he would, but since he is the family's only provider, he must work so that his kids can be successful. After hearing this, I found myself even more proud of my father. He has sacrificed a great deal, and without him, we would not be in America right now.

I have lived practically my entire life in America and have been influenced by the culture here. My father on the other hand, says that he will always be Vietnamese. No matter how Americanized he has become, he will always have roots in Vietnam and that heritage will always be part of his life. Even though he is an American citizen, he still practices old Vietnamese traditions, stays true to family values, and teaches his

children the values of being Vietnamese. Although life in Vietnam was, at times, cruel and harsh, it made him the man he is today. Although we live in America, we do not really celebrate American traditions. Growing up, we never celebrated Christmas nor have we ever had a typical Thanksgiving feast.

Over the years, my family has moved several times and has interacted with people of other races. Surprisingly though, my father claims that he has never experienced racism. Shortly after arriving in America, the only employment my parents could find was work in sweatshops, making clothes. They worked with many other immigrants, including Latinos and Whites. He said that they were all the same. They all came to America for a better life and it made no difference what color they were. They were all Americans, and that is what counted. I, on the other hand, have experienced racism while growing up in East Los Angeles. When I was in middle school, I was the only Asian American at a predominantly Latino school. I was bullied for being Asian and harassed daily. It was an experience I will never forget.

Finally, I asked how he would compare Vietnam with America. He responded by saying that Vietnam is nothing like America. America is a great country that has done so much for him and his family. If it wasn't for America, he probably would have died in the war and lost his family. This entire interview was a good experience for me because I learned a lot about my father. Growing up, I never really talked to him or had much parental guidance in my life. My parents were rarely home because they had to work from 7 AM to 8 PM. I always blamed my parents for not being there for me, but now I realize what they sacrificed for me to be happy. My father is the hardest worker I know. Even today, he works from early morning until late in the evening. Even though he has been through a lot of hard times, he feels that America still has much to offer. He still strives to fulfill the American dream and in some way has almost accomplished it. His hard work is slowly paying off. My sister is enrolled in medical school and I am now in college. My father's legacy will forever be with me and I will one day pass it on to my children and future generations of my family.

SU AND MAI THAI

Jimmy Thai

Asian Americans have important stories to tell and my parents, Su and Mai Thai, are great examples. My father is currently a pharmacist, and my mother is now a homemaker, and they live in Alhambra.

My parents are Asian American immigrants; both were born in Chau Doc, Vietnam. Chau Doc is a town located 250 km west of Saigon and borders Cambodia. It is surprising that my parents married since they came from such different families. My father came from a hard working, educated family that sold fabric at the local market, while my mother's family was more affluent. In Vietnam, my father worked as a pharmacist while my mother had few responsibilities and did not work outside the home.

At the time of the Vietnam War, my father was a lieutenant in the South Vietnamese army; however, he did not participate in combat because he was a university student. After the fall of Saigon in 1975 my father was imprisoned for three years for being a member of the South Vietnamese military. By the time he was released from prison, my sister had already been born. In 1979 my parents decided to immigrate to the United States so that my sister might have a better life. My grandmother on my mother's side provided them with the money to leave. My parents were part of the second wave of Southeast Asian immigrants that came to the United States, known as "boat people." My parents almost didn't make it to America though because the boat was full. Luckily, the captain was related to my mother, and he allowed my parents and sister on board.

My parents arrived in Houston, Texas in 1980. There they stayed with my aunt who had come to the United States with her family a year earlier. In Houston, my parents worked various odd jobs for an electrical company, light bulb manufacturing, a Circle K, and in restaurant kitchens. This was especially difficult for my mother, who was now earning little money. After staying in Houston for several years, my parents moved to San Jose, California in 1984. Around this time, my father decided to take steps toward providing a better life for the family by going back to school to get is bachelor's degree in pharmacy. The pursuit of higher education led my family to Alabama for a short time. Surprisingly, in Alabama people there were quite nice to my family. An elderly woman who lived upstairs befriended my mother and would read stories to her, even though my mother did not understand much English.

Eventually, my father was accepted at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He attended Temple for two years to earn his

bachelor's degree in pharmacy while my mother stayed in San Jose. In 1988, when my father came back, the family moved to Fresno, California. There my father opened his own pharmacy and saved enough money to buy a house. Unfortunately, the business failed and the family moved again. In 1991, we moved to Alhambra, where we've lived ever since. Eventually my father found another job as a pharmacist, but the position was in Sacramento. He accepted the position, moved there, and came home to visit every few weeks. We didn't move with my father to Sacramento because my sister was attending at USC at the time. After working in Sacramento for a few years, my father found a better job closer to home and moved back to Alhambra.

Even though my parents have lived in the United States for almost thirty years, they are still very old-fashioned. We speak Vietnamese exclusively at home and only a few English phrases are allowed. My parents taught me to speak Vietnamese as a child. They believed that children in America would learn English by themselves, whether through popular culture or school. Since my father is a pharmacist he speaks English fairly well, even though he has an accent. He communicates with his patients and co-workers in English. My mother, on the other hand, doesn't speak English very well. She understands some things and can interact with people with simple phrases and questions; but other than that, she doesn't use much English. Since my parents have predominantly Vietnamese friends, and they converse with them in Vietnamese, and my mother's lack of English language skills is not an issue.

Family plays a very important role for my parents. We have always eaten dinner together, even when my father worked until late in the evening. My parents still help support their parents back in Vietnam by sending them money as often as they can and they call my grandparents every week. Since they come from traditional Vietnamese families, my parents believe men should be hard working and successful and women should be good wives and mothers. However, their views on women have relaxed considerably since immigrating to the United States. They understand that women can be professionals as well as being a good wives and mothers. For example, they are proud of my sister who is a pharmacist and also takes care of her family.

Religion plays a significant role in my family as well. Buddhism is my family's religion. My mother is an especially devout Buddhist, and she thanks Buddha for getting them through their many hardships. Every time there is a Buddhist holiday we all pray and give thanks by offering food and lighting incense. To commemorate the anniversary of the death

of my grandfather, we offer our respects by setting a table of food, praying, and inviting him to come home and eat.

My parents have a very strict view on education. They want each of us to go to school, get good grades, go to a university, and continue on to graduate school. My parents are especially persistent about all of us becoming pharmacists. They feel that it is a job that will always be in demand and will pay a decent salary. They push education because they do not want me to have a difficult life as they did. They want me to be prosperous and successful, but sometimes they push so much that it conflicts with what I want.

It is also important to my family, or at least to my mother, that I marry within my own ethnicity, preferably Chinese-Vietnamese. She isn't adamant about it, but she definitely "prefers" it. My parents want to get along with their children's spouses and believe that if they're not from similar cultures then they may not be able to converse and get along. My parents believe it is very important to preserve language because they feel that without a native tongue, a person loses part of his heritage. My mother has jokingly said to me, "if your child doesn't speak Vietnamese, then it doesn't exist to me." This may be partially true, because my parents don't really know how to communicate well than through Vietnamese. If their grandchildren do not speak the language then they may not be able to pass along important parts of their culture.

Clearly, my parents see themselves as Vietnamese first; but they also see themselves as citizens of the United States. They hold on to their Vietnamese identity because it would be shameful if they abandoned it. They do not identify with American culture as much because they see Americans as too concerned with looking out for themselves. Most Asian cultures focus on the group looking out for each other. On the whole though, they believe America has a place for everyone. Even though views might clash, they feel America is a place where many different people can get together to form a nation.

My parents have also preserved their Vietnamese culture through food. Every day the family gathers to eat rice and various savory dishes. They keep their culture intact by practicing the religion of the homeland. They've adapted to American culture in the sense that every family member is self-sufficient. My sister's family is more Americanized. They do not practice Buddhism much, they do not cook at home every day, and they eat different types of food. Personally, I find my sister's family a little too assimilated. It is possible that my upbringing has made me a more traditional person.

My parents have not experienced much racism since they immigrated. Even in Alabama, which is perceived as mostly white and not very welcoming to different ethnicities, they were welcomed. I do feel that prejudice exists, but more because of cultural differences than because of race. My parents feel that America is a place where everyone is welcomed. That, they believe, is its greatest attribute. They think America is great for letting people from all backgrounds come and make a life for themselves. They find it amazing that people from poorer backgrounds and different countries can come to the United States and become successful.

I feel that my parents' lives are rich in history and experience. These experiences have helped shape them into Asian Americans. I find it admirable that they have stayed so true to their roots by preserving their culture and traditions. However, since I have grown up in a western society, I find that my views often clash with theirs. I find it difficult to argue with them because somehow, I have to prove my worth to them. Their conservative nature often goes against what I consider to be the norm. Yet standing up to them would be disrespectful.

YUCHANG HUANG

Xinzhe Huang

Everyone has a story, and the experiences of Asian Americans seem to be very special. I realized this by interviewing my grandfather, a 78-years old U.S. citizen, who is living in Los Angeles now. From this interview, I began to understand the difficulties, struggles, and confusion my grandparents experienced.

My grandfather was born in 1931, Meixian, Guangdong Province, mainland China. As he recalled, he became ill with smallpox at the age of two. Since there was no adequate medicine available at the time, he almost died from it. Luckily, a very famous doctor saved his life. When he told me about this, he said that, "one should appreciate those people who helped you, because you can not become who you are without the help of others".

He was a good son and a good student in the school. Since my great grandfather used to have chronic diseases, my grandfather earned

money at very young age to support his family. He studied hard as well and always ranked number one in his class. At the age of 18, he went to Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, majored in Pediatrics and became a doctor.

When I asked why he chose to come to the United States, he said that they came here because my great grandfather wanted to have a family reunion. My great grandfather was a military doctor of the Chinese Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party). When the Communist Party defeated the Kuomintang, he left Taiwan and came to the United States. He and my grandfather had been separated for over 50 years. Finally in 1994, my grandfather took my grandmother to the United States. Although their initial intention was just to visit my great grandfather, they did not want to go back to China permanently anymore.

Before I came to the United States to study, I thought it a paradise. Every time when my grandparents went back to China and visit us, they always brought a lot of gifts and told us that America is a very nice country. The weather is great, the climate is good, people are nice, not much pollution and so on. We seldom heard of any difficulties they experienced. However, when I came here, I found that they had gone through many difficulties that I had not known about before.

When my grandparents first arrived in the U.S. in 1994, they only had $200 in their pocket and they did not have anything else. After my great grandfather passed away, they rented a house and they slept on the floor because there was no bed. During those hard days, some nice people helped them out a lot, but they realized that they needed to find a job in order to make a living, to survive in the United States.

Since my grandmother could not speak English, she found a job in a garment factory, sewing clothes day and night. She said that the working conditions were really terrible, during summer it was very hot, in winter it was very cold, and her wages were very low. Yet she realized that it was important to keep her job because my grandfather at that time could not find a suitable job.

A lot of people complain that they cannot find work just because they are not good at English, but my grandfather told me that English was not a very big problem for him. His professors taught him in English when he was at the university, and in this case he felt that people treated him well and gave him more respect because he was good at English. He also told me stories about how people succeeded in the United States, even though they did not speak any English at all. As he said: “The thing is not how other people look at you, but how you look at yourself. If you

think you can work hard on things, like English, then you will definitely succeed at last."

However, it seems that although my grandfather can speak English well, his old age still made it difficult for him to find a job. As he recalled, his first job was as a medical-assistant in a Chinese herbal shop. He earned only eight dollars for each patient. However, not many people came to the shop, and he could barely make 200 dollars every month. Then he quit the job and looked for other opportunities.

He tried other kinds of jobs like a postman, hotel manager, and chemistry teacher. Realizing those jobs were actually not appropriate for his old age, he volunteered at a large hospital. There he had a very good opportunity when someone introduced him to the Chinese Service Center (CSC), a community-based health organization in downtown LA. He finally got a license and started as a regular employee at the CSC where he worked for more than ten years.

After six years of hard work, finally in 2000, my grandfather became a U.S. citizen and life improved. Both he and my grandmother got Supplemental Security Income (SSI), medical insurance, and food stamps. They also began to enjoy their life. They quit their jobs, and they began to exercise in the park, began to go shopping and to travel. Still, they were not rich people, but they could live with less stress and pressure. As my grandpa recalled, "as long as people are determined to have a good life in the United States, they will finally make it."

Family was extremely important to my grandfather. He told me that the most exciting moment in the year is when they see their family members waiting for them at the airport. He said that in the United States people like to have more time individually. However, he likes the family reunion and enjoys being surrounded by family, which makes him feel warm and happy. He said that family plays a crucial role because that is their spiritual harbor, and they feel like they are not alone in the United States because there are family members thinking about them.

My grandfather said he has the same expectations for boys and for girls. Traditionally the Chinese believe that boys in the family are more important because they inherit the family's property and business. Although he did not think like that, when he came to the United States he was very surprised that girls can make money and guys stay at home and take care of the children; here, girls can be very intelligent and independent. He still thinks girls should also take care of the family and their kids. Guys should still be pillars in their family, instead of using

their wives' money. They should make money for the family, and they should try their best to protect their wives and children.

He expects all his children and grandchildren to be well educated. He said that he always told his children to study hard, and he expected my aunt to go to university as much as he expected my father and my uncle to pursue higher education. He said that women should not just depend on men, they should also have their careers, they should also be well-educated, because they would get more respect from men and they will have a better life.

He said he came to the United States because he wanted to set up a place for his children, especially his grandchildren's education. He expects my cousins and me to get the best education in the world, so that we can contribute to society. My grandparents always remind me "only when you get a good education can you meet good people who can play a very important role in your life."

From the time that he retired, my grandfather's life became much more relaxed. During his free time, he likes to listen to old Chinese songs. He said those songs are very important for them because they were greatly influenced by Chairman Mao and the Communist Party. He also told me that people at that time were willing to sacrifice themselves and guard their motherland, and a lot of them were very selfless. He said that they learned to endure and tried to overcome difficulties, including famine, diseases, and wars.

Among the songs he usually listened to, "Beijing has a Golden Sun," "In the field of Hope," "I Guard the Great Motherland," "East is Red" are his favorites. He said that when he listens to those songs, he remembers his youth. The songs also give him spiritual comfort, and they inspire him. Sometimes in America life is lonely, my grandparents choose to use music to keep them company in a way.

He said that in the United States you have to be independent, you have to be able to adapt to society. It seems that my grandpa is different from my father's generation in some ways. First, my grandpa feels more comfortable when speaking with Americans, but my parents do not. He knows the way Americans talk and what kinds of topics they are interested in. Also, my grandpa does not like to eat things together using chopsticks, he likes to separate food into individual plates and eat. My parents often say that my grandpa has become Americanized.

Living in the United States for over fifteen years, my grandfather defines himself as "Chinese-American." My grandfather told me that the "difficulty is when people think you are Chinese-American, you have to

become more successful. They can hardly understand why so many people are washing dishes in America, and they have no sympathy for those who are not successful." He thinks it is hard to be accepted by mainstream society. Indeed, with a lot of cultural differences and language barriers, it is difficult for immigrants to enjoy the same comfortable lives as people who are born in America.

My grandfather thinks that America does include them as Americans, since they enjoy equal rights, and the government gives them welfare. But still, he feels that as Asian Americans, they are still different. Although he is a U.S. citizen, he never thinks he is fully American. He does not know much about popular culture, and he is too old to compete with those who have good jobs and high salaries. He feels that Americans are friendly and nice, but he just cannot be one of them.

Sometimes, he told me, he still thinks of the rivers in his hometown, the street that he used to walk, and the people he used to know. It was really hard for him to forget about his memories, even though he is here, in the United States. Probably that's why he thinks there is a strong link between his motherland and America, since both places have become important for him in his life.

As a Chinese-American, my grandfather still identifies himself with his ancestral heritage. For example, he said that his primary language is Chinese. Unlike many Americans, he saves money for the future instead of spending it all. He said that living in America does not mean that people should forget about being Chinese or Chinese culture. He believes that people will look down on those who forget where they came from.

However, in some ways he identifies with American culture. For example, he likes to eat sandwiches and hamburgers, which he never ate before. Also, he learned American ways of speaking with other people. He said Chinese people are usually not straightforward enough when they are trying to say something, but Americans are much more direct.

He preserves some cultural practices of his family's heritage in many ways. For example, people in Guangdong province worship their ancestors. They go to their ancestors' graves to place fruit and meat on them, and praying for their families' prosperity. Every year my grandfather goes back to Meixian to worship the ancestors, and he thinks that is very necessary. He said that, "just because you are in America does not mean that you can forget your ancestors. One should always know where his root is." Although he has experienced poverty, struggles,

and famine in his homeland, he still has a deep love for his country because that is where he was born.

He has also adopted American cultural practices. Before coming to the United States, they have never celebrated western holidays. However, now he also celebrates holidays like Christmas or Thanksgiving. He said that he likes those holidays, especially Thanksgiving, since it celebrates the idea of helping other people.

Toward the end of the interview, I asked him how he defines the American dream. He said to him it is the dream of happiness, wealth, and high social status. He said in the United States, people have to start fresh. Unless your parents are presidents, in America, everyone has to start from zero. It is a place full of competition, a place suitable for the survival of the fittest.

As a result of this interview, I have a better understanding of my grandfather's life in America. I can appreciate their struggles and their fears of not being accepted by either Americans or Chinese people. I understand how hard they try to preserve traditional culture and embrace American culture. I was greatly inspired by my grandparents' stories and I know I should appreciate what I have right now, and work hard to achieve what I want.