> 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