

Oral History Interview
Michigan History – Spring 2000
Interviewee: Johnny Ho
Interviewer: John Vlnka
3 April 2000

JH: Okay, my name is Johnny Ho. I was born [date removed], 1975 in Vietnam, Saigon, Vietnam. I emigrated here from Vietnam in 1986 as a refugee. Right now I currently am living on campus...Brownstone Apartments. Currently employed at the admissions office here at Hope.

JV: You immigrated to the United States, what part of Vietnam did you come from?

JH: Saigon, Southern...

JV: That's South Vietnam?

JH: Yes.

JV: Describe what your homeland is like when you lived there.

JH: Extensive poverty. That's all I can remember.

JV: Is that why you immigrated to the United States? Or were there other reasons?

JH: Definitely. The reason is that they are a communist country and very oppressive. My parents wanted me to have a better future, and they heard that America is the "Land of Opportunity," and that's what they wanted me to have: opportunity to have a bright future. So they spent a lot of money for me to come to here.

JV: Did you have relatives from the US, or was it general knowledge that told you about things and opportunities in America?

JH: Yeah, my parents knew about America through the Vietnam War.

JV: What concerns did you have about leaving Vietnam? Or were you too small to realize?

JH: Yeah. I was too young to realize, you know, I'm leaving my homeland and starting a new life in a new country. Also leaving all my family members behind was hard.

JV: How did you get to the United States?

JH: Refugee. As a refugee...boat people. We risked our lives.

JV: With who? Your parents and others?

JH: I traveled with family friend.

JV: Did anyone in your family come?

JH: No, just me alone.

JV: Why did you choose the United States? Not some other country like Canada or somewhere in Europe for example?

JH: We had no choice. My decision to leave was...my decision to leave for the United States was all based on luck and maybe faith because we were stranded in the ocean for almost a month without food and water, and luckily we were picked up by the fisherman, a Filipino, from Philippines. And they took us ashore and fed us. There we wait for a sponsor from the United States. We waited there maybe six months before were allowed to enter the US.

JV: When you entered, where did you first go?

JH: Our sponsor was from Michigan—Holland, Michigan. And that's where we headed.

JV: That's where they took you at first?

JH: Yep.

JV: What were your impressions of Holland, Michigan when you first got there?

JH: I found out that here in the US, there is definitely less poverty. Much cleaner environment...the air. People were definitely different in appearance.

JV: When you first got here what were some of the problems you faced when you were adjusting to life? And maybe now as well?

JH: Oh, there were so many. Definitely the language barrier. Communication was tough going through elementary school.

JV: Did you speak English before you came here?

JH: No. None whatsoever. All I knew was "Yes" and "No."

JV: Where were you first employed when you got older? Or where were your parents employed?

JH: Oh my parents were...not my parents, my legal guardians. They were employed in a factory at Herman Miller...yeah Herman Miller.

JV: How do you think the move affected you and the people you came with?

JH: The move definitely affected me. It had a great impact on my life then and now. Now I have a better education, live in a better environment and just more opportunities for the future.

JV: What traditions did you bring back with you from Vietnam?

JH: There are a few traditions I brought back with me. One is the language. In the house we are required to speak Vietnamese. No English. We also celebrate many holidays such as New Year, called Tet. We also celebrate Christmas the American

way. I usually hang out with people; Vietnamese people where I can speak Vietnamese, where I can communicate better with Vietnamese.

JV: So why have you stayed in Holland, or are you legally obligated to since coming here?

JH: No I don't have to stay in Holland but I feel its better to get my education here in Holland because at Hope it's a small school with a good education program. I wanted to finish my school here at Hope before I make any further decisions to move or stick around.

JV: In what ways have you been involved in the community of Holland?

JH: At school here at Hope, I am currently involved with HAPA. It's Hope Asian Perspective Association. We promote Asian awareness on campus. Also I am currently working at the Rest Haven and retirement home where I interact with many senior citizens. It's fun to talk to them and learn about their past lives.

JV: A Lot of Holland is really strong in the church. Do you have any church affiliation or religion?

JH: Unfortunately...I'd like to say I do but I attend church, but not the same church every time. One time you can see me at one church and the next week another.

JV: What religion is that?

JH: Catholic.

JV: Most recently Holland has become more culturally diverse and when you see new immigrants settling in Holland, what do you think about them?

JH: Oh I think that's great! Diversity is important, you know. It's a way to exchange ideas and just diversity is good.

JV: What did you think about the overwhelming Dutch influence on Holland when you came here?

JH: Coming from Vietnam, a very Oriental country, the Dutch are pretty interesting. It's different.

JV: What do you think of the Spanish influence in Holland? Do you have different feelings about it compared to the Dutch?

JH: Like I said, I mean diversity is all good. And influence from different nationalities bring good things.

JV: Do you see Hispanics facing similar problems in opportunity when you came here or other groups coming in new to Holland or have things changed since 1986?

JH: Yeah definitely I feel the Hispanics are facing the same problems as we Asians do here in Holland. Job wise, they're holding jobs way at the bottom, factory jobs like we do. I'm sure the language is also a problem, although the Hispanic language is becoming more popular. In the future I feel the Hispanic language is going to be more widely used than it is now today.

JV: I already asked you a similar question how you feel about the Dutch, but how do you feel about the way they preserved it, trying to keep up some of the old customs and traditions?

JH: I think they're doing a good job putting up new buildings and museums to preserve the Dutch culture.

JV: Living in Holland, how do you feel about Tulip Time, other than the traffic?

JH: Tulip Time is great. At first it was real interesting to go watch the parades and meet people, but it eventually gets old and I don't really care much about it.

JV: What do you think about the Cinco de Mayo for the Hispanic Community?

JH: Unfortunately I don't really know much about the Cinco de Mayo festival, but I heard about it. It's creating awareness for they're traditions.

JV: Do you feel the community celebrates your heritage or Asian heritage well or is it lacking?

JH: Definitely lacking. I don't see any festival going on. Although we do as HAPA at Hope we try to create awareness.

JV: So do you feel your community is well represented in city of Holland as a whole? Does it have a voice?

JH: I feel as an Asian living in a Dutch community here in Holland, we have no say in anything. It's all black and white. Every issue is black and white, you never hear Asian. So I hope in the future we can see more Asian representatives in the community.

JV: Do feel you have been discriminated against here in Holland?

JH: Personally I don't feel that I have been discriminated against at all here in Holland. People are pretty accepting and tolerant towards other nationalities.

JV: So what would you say to a friend moving to the United States or Holland specifically?

JH: Holland is a good place to start, especially with an education. It's a quiet town where not much is going on. There's time to study and get your education. There are also a lot of job opportunities here. Holland is definitely a good place to start.