

**Student Handout**  
**Oakland Museum of California**  
**What's Going On? California and the Vietnam Era**  
**Lesson Plan #3**  
**Coming to Terms: Stories of Southeast Asian Political Refugees**

**Oral History**

**Anh Phong**

**Anh Phong is a Vietnamese American artist.**

My name's Anh Phong. I came to America in year 1982, so I grew up in Vietnam during the wartime, the Vietnam wartime. Before we talk about it, maybe I could go back a little bit, about the background.

*Interviewer: Okay.*

In 1975, I finished the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, so a lot of people start like, escaping Vietnam already, but my family think maybe it's ok. *[inaudible]* ... So I didn't see anything affecting my life yet, until I finished high school, and then entered in university. That's the time it hits me. Because when I entered the university, and I choose fine arts as major, I didn't get accepted. Because I'm not a Communist Party member. And I tried three years, I said couldn't get into the school. Then by that time I see the reality. So when I had a chance to escape, then I went. So, and I live in Vietnam, in Saigon, in South Vietnam, in the city. So when we escaped we went, I went all the way from the city to the countryside. And pretended, pretending my *[inaudible]* as a *[inaudible]* woman, dressed up like them. And went all the way down. I was lucky. I was one of the people that made it to America anyway. So went through the refugee camp for one year, in Malaysia, and Philippines for one year, before coming to America. When I came over, I had a sister in Connecticut, so she sponsored me come over here. And in Vietnam during the senior years in high school, I was with a lot of people, I went to the new economic reason/zone, that's the area that the, a lot of war was on at that time, so we were forced to went out there to clean up the war zone. And we didn't have any tools so we used our hand as a shovel to shovel all the dirt, to make the canal so all the toxic... Because of Vietnam have six month raining and six month dry, so the rain... We dumped all the toxic from that area, from the canal go out to the ocean. So after one year down in that area, when I came back, I had skin cancer. And I have pneumonia, so when I come America I was too cold in Connecticut. I couldn't take it. So I *[laughs]* *[inaudible]* driver flew all the way down to California and in *[inaudible]* in Southern California is pretty warm, and I get *[inaudible]* treatment at that time, so I become normal right now. So right now I can talk a lot about it, but at that time, like, there was a lot of suffering going on. So the first couple of years I didn't paint, because a lot of... first group of immigrant come to America, you



think about the economical reason, how to survive in America, so I studied dental. I studied like biology and all the pre-dent, and I didn't like it. I hated it. So this one time I got into car accident and I was in hospital and told myself, I wasn't happy so far, so when I get out of hospital I dumped my major and I changed to fine arts. And so... And at that time I found myself again. And once I found what I wanted, I made a play. Pretty heavy commitment on myself. I want to do it. I want to make it. So in a short time, I get out. I finish school as a outstanding student of the year in our department in Cal Poly Pomona. And I become an artist in that time, and I very active, submit my work outside, show my work in the group show and slowly go to gallery, museums, solo show, to today. So today when I look back, yeah, it's a very rough way to go but I did it.

*Interviewer: So do you consider yourself an American?*

I think I have more American thinking inside me than the Asian thinking. I change a lot. I was pretty weak before, when I was in my teenage, I didn't know how to fight back. A lot of time when I talk back to my parents or by giving my opinion, they wouldn't appreciate it. They would yell at me. You know? And then they'd tell me, "You talk like this? When you grew up nobody will marry you. When you talk too much, you fight back." Things like that. And even one time when I had a boyfriend in Vietnam, then he just started dating me, and then he advised me, like, "Why don't you take some home economic classes? Like say you can do embroidering, you can cooking..." And so I listened to him, I did. I took the embroidering class, and then I took a cooking class. But *[inaudible]* just do for fun, I don't want to do it for life. So I dump him. *[Laughs]* But my husband right now, I think because we grew/grow up the same time, we went through a lot of thing together, and he worked with American company for a long time, so he held/have a lot of American thinking. So I have a lot of freedom for myself. Have to do my own thing. Ok, I got to make money, I have to do things, so when I paint, leave me alone. You know? Because *[inaudible]* not an artist, he's an engineer, so he look at thing in a very practical way. Every time I painting and he ask me, "How much can you sell?" *[inaudible]* that's it. Leave me alone. I work. I make money, so can I sell them or not? That's a different thing. But at least I feel happy. *[inaudible]* I did it. I can express something I wanted to, so I'm happy. So it doesn't matter to me the money part. But to him it's not practical. That's the difference. But beside that, he... I don't think he can stop me from painting. Because he know me by now. I'm pretty sure in that way, so leave me alone. *[Laughs]*

*Interviewer: So what does it mean to be an American to you?*

You live in America for a long time, like if the children grow up in America, they don't see this part. Until they go out to different country. When they come back, they will kiss American land



when they out of airplane. In Vietnam, after '75, when the Communists took over, if you go to visit your grandma, you go somewhere. You had to go down to the police station to get a stamp of approval. To get out of your house, to go someone's house. And you're not allowed to have a meeting, a party, inside your house, because they don't want people grouped together. When people group together, we talk bad about the government. That we will revolt, ok? So there's... none of those things allowed. So everywhere you go, you go to school, you have to do – how do you say it? – the report about your family, anybody in your family is Communist Party members? Anybody in your family work for the old regime, the old government? If you write out those things, that's how they filter out that people cannot go to university. And you cannot go from city to countryside. You cannot go anywhere in the country, because they don't want people moving around. They cannot control. So with those, and on top of the cultural thing, the woman a lot of time they dare not to go outside their house because they might get robbed, they might be raped. It happens a lot, in... Because the woman, they don't have a voice, and then... A lot of time when you get raped you feel embarrassed to tell everybody, because nobody will marry you anymore. Thing like that. Because they don't protect your name, they don't protect your [inaudible] at all. So people, they are not say it, even though you get raped, you dare not say it out. So when you come to America, you feel like you have the power to, the power to say thing out. To protect your own life, because your life [inaudible] quality/equality inside your life, so not... You don't just appreciate the human rights in America, you also appreciate the woman's rights in America. That's how they protect you as a woman. So those things I see a big difference between the country that I come from and come over here. Yeah. But if you talk about the old regime in Vietnam, because at that time I was too young. I didn't know much. But you talk about a Communist country, that's what I grew up, and I see those things, so I can compare during the time ... in Vietnam and the time I'm in America right now. That's how I see the difference.

