

**HISTORY SA: MIGRATION MUSEUM****INTERVIEWEE: Mr Tung Ngo****Summary of interview recorded in Adelaide on 21 December 2010**

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**CM: Interview with Tung Ngo at the Migration Museum, on the 21st of December 2010, interviewer Catherine Manning. Interview is being conducted for a planned exhibition at the Migration Museum, working title “Who are we now?”**

**Tung can I get you to state your full name for me?**

TN: Tung The Ngo

**Can I also ask where you come from?**

I came from Vietnam.

**You were born there?**

Yes I was born in Vietnam, and I left Vietnam when I was about nine.

**Whereabouts in Vietnam were you born.**

I was born in Da Nang which is central Vietnam, and I lived in Saigon after the war until I left to come here.

**So you grew up there?**

I grew up there when I was young.

**How old were you when you arrived here?**

About eleven. I stayed in a refugee camp for about a year and a half before I came here.

**Where was the camp?**

The Philippines. In Palawan. There was a refugee camp called Palawan where most Vietnamese refugees stayed.

**And how did you get to there from Saigon?**

Ah, we had to, obviously get out and we used boats to escape from Vietnam and then we were picked up by a, like a humanitarian refugee ship, that picked up refugees and they dropped us off in the [refugees camp in the] Philippines.

**And so since you were 11 years old you've grown up most of your life in Australia.**

In Australia, yes I've been here since '82, so that's what, 28 years. Yes – 28 years here.

**And now where do you come from?**

Now where do I come from? Obviously, Adelaide South Australia.

**And how would you describe who you are to someone else?**

I would say [I am] Australian, with a Vietnamese heritage. So if someone asked me who I am, that's what I would say.

**And if I asked you for a bit more information on who you are as a person? What would you say then?**

Who am I as a person? Well I would say I'm a very community minded person, I like to think about what other people are up to, and [how to be] involved with the community surrounding, or the neighbours and community surrounding where I live [and how everyone can do their little bit so that the community can be a better place.]

**Wonderful. We've talked a little bit about this but who would you describe as your people? If I said 'who are your people?'**

Obviously I said I'm an Australian with a Vietnamese background, heritage, so I would say like many Australians where we have a background from a different country. So I would say [my people are my current community or the people I associate with.]

**And if we look at your family, how would you describe your family?**

Oh, it depends how you describe the word family, it's quite broad, but I'd say my [immediate] family – I came from a large family of twelve, but we were all separated. Because of the war, and because ... we had to escape, or get out of Vietnam, at different stages of our lives. [Most of my brothers and sisters] live in America now so I would say [they are] my family, even though we've got a big large family, but we're scattered around the world. But, I wouldn't say it's unstable, it's just something that happened, that we're not in one place, or country, as many other families. [Nevertheless, we do love each other dearly and are concerned for each other's welfare.]

**Can I deviate from the questions for a little bit and ask did you come to Australia on your own then? Or with any members of your family?**

No I should have said, I came here with my eldest sister, I came with her [family].

**What's her name?**

Phuong Ngo.

**Were separated with the rest of your family before then or, you left first, or ...?**

No, no, I went with my sister and her family, but I had brother and sisters who left before me and they ended up in America ... .. So, yes –

**And where do you fit in the family? Are you the oldest, the youngest - ?**

I'm the ninth [of 12]. So there are three younger brothers. ... Yeah, three.

**It's a big family.**

... ..Yes, [you can say that again.]

**And your parents, are they alive?**

Yes, they're still alive, they're in their late 70s. But yeah, our family's big – the eldest sister, there's a huge age gap between my eldest sister and me, there's about eighteen years difference or something [my sister would kill me if she found out that I just told you that].

**So it [is] a big family that's spread around the world.**

Mmm, it's a big family, yes. [When you have a large family, they do get scattered around during war time.]

**Are you happy to tell me a little bit about when your family was separated and the war or ... ?**

Oh yeah, yeah, no – just during – after the Vietnam War, Vietnam was very unstable in terms of, there was fighting with the neighbouring countries, and – young boys often being made to join the army and fight [for their country.] [Personally] my parents wanted their children to have a better life [and not to become a statistic of war]. So when [their] boys in their teenage years ... .. my parents often sent them slowly out the country, so that they weren't being forced to join the army. That's how it started [and I would say many other Vietnamese families would do at that time]. When I – you know around ah – actually I wasn't meant to go, because I was still around about nine, ten, so it wasn't my time up yet but my – the other brother who was older than me [was] meant to go but he got into trouble or something I think, from fighting too much with me or something like that and my sister [who was in her 20's then] couldn't cope with taking him [along] so she said [to my parents] 'Oh well I'll take Tung instead.' So I ended up going instead of my older brother but then him – later on he – he came out a bit later on.

**So he's in Australia as well?**

No he's in America.

**He's in America.**

There's three of us here, two sisters [one] who came out before us, in the late '70s, and she was able to sponsor my sister and I to Australia from the refugee camp.

**And what year was it that you arrived?**

I arrived in July 1982.

**It must have been a hard decision for your parents, to send their children slowly away?**

Ah, yes, it [must have been very] hard [for my parents]. Actually I spoke to my mum on the weekend, on the Friday night, I often call her, and she said 'Ah Tung, you're one of my favourite sons, because I felt like I neglected you all my life.' (laughs) So I said 'Don't worry, I turned out alright [touch wood].' (laughs) 'You don't have to worry about that mum.' But, yeah, she kept saying that 'cause she's, you know, coming near to the end of her life. So she said 'Oh I've got to tell you this but I felt we really neglected – and sent you away at such a young age.' Yeah.

**So are your mum and father still in Vietnam, or they're ...?**

No they're in America.

**They're in America.**

[Most family members are] in America now. Yeah, so ...

**Ah, you weren't tempted to follow them?**

I was at one stage. When I was young, my parents, brothers and sisters, were on my back all the time, coming to America to live, and, yeah. But, yeah I was tempted at one stage but then I decided not to, because I was having too much fun here. (laughs) And plus this is a great country so I didn't want to, really, leave a good country to go to a place that I'm not quite familiar with. [It was a very tough decision for me to make.]

**I'll – just going back to my questions, I asked you before where you fit in the family, do you think you have a role in the family?**

I think I do. Obviously we're all grown up and we all do our different things, but, I do have a role because I'm involved quite a bit with community work, and it's really completely the opposite with my other brothers and sisters who – they just go to work and mainly hang around with, just ordinary people, they don't [get] involved much with

community activity [for personal reasons]. So in some ways they see me as someone different and sometimes they – they say they're quite proud of it because I'm like a – someone completely different. And yeah, then you know, when I get mentioned in the newspaper, they all know about it, and yeah I think they feel proud of my involvement.

**So if you had to put a label on it what would you say your role in the family is?**

I would say I'm more like a – ah, like a go-between person. And that's always been my life, [a moderator]. So that would be my role. So if there's a fight on (laughs) I would try to sort it out. (laughs) Yes.

**Do you think that's connected to your community works?**

I think so yeah, yeah. Yeah.

**- your role as the negotiator or the go-between?**

I think ... I mean as a community person you're always trying to find the best solution – a compromise solution. So that's what I am ... yeah that's what I do. When things happen in the family I always try to find a solution, and try to resolve things.

**Wonderful. Do you think that's changed in your lifetime?**

Changed?

**Your role in the family?**

In terms, could you explain it a bit more?

**Well, do you think your place or your role has changed? Have you always been the go-between? Or – ?**

Oh, ok. Ah, no I wouldn't say that. I mean as you grow older and you get involved and you get more confidence – and with the Vietnamese culture often adults [are] making decisions. It's a bit hard for a younger person to speak up or make decisions. But as you get older and get more confident you are able to – to challenge (laughs), and to say what you think. And I've obviously grown up here too, so obviously it's changed over time. As you grow older.

**We've talked a little bit obviously about your cultural background. Vietnamese and Australian, how important do you think your cultural background is to who you are?**

Ah, I think it's very important, because, in some ways, even though I grew up here, I still have a lot of Vietnamese in me (laughs). In terms of the way I think, the way – the food I eat, and – in some being conservative as well. So that's – I think it does play a big part – still plays a big part in my life. Yes.

**So can you describe that a little bit more for me? So you say the way you think is influenced by your Vietnamese background. How would you see that as different to the way an Anglo-Australian perhaps would think?**

Oh ok. I suppose – I'm still very much about – how do I put it?

**Or not even how it's different to an Anglo-Australian but how it is Vietnamese? How would you describe [how] the way you think is Vietnamese?**

Yeah ... to follow on the next – it's a good question, because there's many people with ethnic, or, just saying, in my case Vietnamese background, because we came over when we're just about – like a teenager. So we...I would call it like a in a 'no-man land' where we're not quite fully Vietnamese and we're not quite fully, you know, Australian<sup>s</sup>, so we're stuck in the middle. So we often, I would say, in the early years I would say,

when we're trying to find where our roots are or where we're from I would say there's a cultural shock in that early stage. Obviously as we grow older we tend to fall back towards our heritage. But, in terms of the way I think, I'm not as revealing, or I'm more – or maybe it's just the way I am, but I'm not as open as an Anglo person, I think because of my cultural background. And I still have that respect in terms of, if someone older than me, or someone in a higher position, I still have that respect for them, but if in a current society or a young person here have been brought up to be quite open and challenge and be quite believe in your thinking, so that's where I'm different, where I still sit back and listen to someone who is in authority or who is higher than me and respect that, respect who they are but not aggressive enough to challenge them so that I think would be the unique thing I've still got as a Vietnamese person.

**And are there any traditions that you practice still that you describe as Vietnamese?**

Obviously I was brought up as a Catholic, Vietnamese Catholics, and I still celebrate some festivals like New Year and obviously the food which I very much love so that's the tradition I still hold very strongly.

**Do you make it yourself or someone in your family?**

I can make some myself but the [Vietnamese Pho] soup I like, I'll often go and buy because it's a lot quicker, it takes a lot of time and effort to make, those soups, just to have by yourself or a small family. It's just cheaper to go out and eat.

**And can I get you to describe just a little bit about some of those traditions, for example, what do you do that is typically Vietnamese for New Year?**

Obviously New Year, I ring my parents up to give them New Year greetings, and obviously other family members to wish them best for the New Year. We have special dishes that we only make during the New Year period, so it's a special Banh Chung

Steam cake so we try that and we cook special Vietnamese dish and we use that occasion to have a nice dinner or a nice lunch.

**Lovely, and you talked about going to mass still. Do you go a particularly Vietnamese congregation or is it Australian.**

No I go to St Mary's which is in Torrens Road Croydon Park. It's a very multicultural parish, they have Vietnamese, they have Filipinos, the Africans, the Indians, the Australians, so it is very multicultural.

**Do you think that's that changed how you practise your faith? Or is it still the same with different people?**

I'm a bit different because of my community involvement. I've learned to respect other cultures and other peoples' heritage so when I go to Mass it's more about being involved with now a community. And what I practise or believe then is for myself because other people have prayers and we just have to respect that. It's become more vibrant where I go, yeah.

**So we've talked quite a bit about your Vietnamese cultural background, so how would you describe your Australian cultural background?**

That's just as I said, we come from a generation where, what's the word where you're not quite one. You're like half half... so sometimes we do think ... we're very much Australian, but we're not fully Australian so we always fall back to the Vietnamese culture because that's the way I was brought up for 10 years or so [when I was in Vietnam]. But my Australian is, I'm very easy going, I'm very laid back. When I went to America that's how Vietnamese Americans found myself. They said 'You are very laid back.' And I think that's because the society and the culture I grew up that's made .... .... like that. Also the community involvement in terms of trying to contribute and trying to get involved with community activities. I think that sort of came from the Australian

culture that I was brought up in or went to school and hang out with certain friends that influence my thinking about caring for other people and caring for the environments. So I think I was influenced by certain friends that I hang around with during my high school years too, they always told me to watch the ABC (laughs). And the ABC often show[s] these shows about the community. So I think that's me being brought up as an Australian person.

**Did you grow up here with your sister and brother-in-law?**

[For a number of years I did. However, when I was in year 12] I went and boarded with an Australian family. And I think that's what influenced my community involvements, and instead of being a shy Asian person I branched out to wanting to help and do things. And not being paid also (laughs).

**And are there any traditions that you practice that you describe as being Australian?**

Aah ... I would say, I don't drink a lot but I would say going out. Can we come back to that? That's a very good question.

**No, that's fine. I asked before about where you were born, can you remind me when you were born?**

Yeah, I was born in 1972.

**Do you think your generation is different to the one that came before or after it?**

Yes, as I said before, I would say we were different in terms ... we know that we were first generation but we are the young first generation. The older first generations like my sisters and a lot of my friends' parents where they are here and have to work very hard to make a living and try to better themselves. But we, the first generation of young

people, we go to school here but we are not actually born here. So I say we are different in terms of the first generation of young people, but not quite the second generation. I don't know if there's a word for it or not.

**Can't think of it sorry. Do you think that affects the identity of people in your generation at all? Does that make you different in any way from the generations before and after?**

Yes, I would say so too. I still think that our generation that we have faced a lot more problems at school than the second generation. The first generation adults probably faced more problems at work but we faced more problems at school. So we are not quite an adult age that goes to work, not quite young enough to go to primary school but just high school so there's a difference that we faced more problems in schooling than the second generation.

**Has that impacted on your personalities or who you are as people?**

I would say so because sometimes it is. I know it is not only me but my friends too, but we do see ourselves as disadvantaged, because we passed our teens, we reached teenage years and the language. When you reach teenage years, it's harder to learn, so we suffer as a consequence in terms of language barriers and that probably knocks a lot of confidence out of a lot of [people of] my generation. But we do make it up for by working a lot harder to make it up. We study a lot harder. But the second generation, kids born here, now that passes a lot easier for them, and the parents, by the time they have kids here they would be more comfortable where they invest in the kids' education a lot more. They pay more attention to their kids. Whereas my generation, the younger first generation we were often left by ourselves and do whatever really. So that is different in life experience, because of the time that we are here.

**So you had to be fairly independent and hard working?**

Oh, yes, I know that a lot of my friends are the same. And talking about at 13 or younger and pretty much being left to ourself, and it's up to us to study. I know for the first few years I was watching TV to 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning (laughs) because we were left by ourselves to do whatever we liked. Because the first generation, they put all their time into making money, going to work in the factory and stuff like that. They weren't putting the investment into children's education. But it is all different now.

**What would you say if I asked you what defines your generation?**

What defined? All the things I just said about we would have to work hard so ---

**We hear a lot in Australia about generation X and Generation Y and the Baby Boomers. Where do you think your generation fits into that or is it irrelevant?**

Yeah, I don't know where we fit in because we are not Generation X or the Boomers (laughs). I don't know where we fit, I think just between, a bit here, a bit there, it's very hard to define. I've got to think it through.

**Just going back to a different theme, what groups do you belong to, outside, we've talked about you religion and your cultural background, are there any other groups that you belong to?**

I'm an elected member for the Port Adelaide Enfield Council so my involvement... I am often involved with a lot of ethnic groups and groups that they can see me a person that they can relate to. So I know I am in a unique position so I do my best to be part of those groups and make myself available to them because I can understand things that some groups have got to go through. So I try to make their lives as easy as possible for them if I can help it. So apart from going to Mass, Church group there are other groups which I am involved with.

**Can you tell me a bit more about them?**

At the moment it's obviously mainly the new arrivals. It deals with through my involvement, and being an elected member, it opens doors for me to meet them and for them to meet me. And often with new arrivals they do have questions and they do have issues that sometimes they like to ask, someone they feel comfortable, so, it's just all about confidence, and you know, because I've been there before. If they ask me something, I know exactly what they meant and I help them as much as I can.

**And what about hobbies or teams that you support or anything like that?**

Oh ok hobbies, I mean am very busy but I do follow Australian football, the AFL, I follow Port Power, Port Adelaide Power. When I came in the eighties I knew nothing about football, and I can't remember what it was, someone gave me a jumper, a guernsey of the Port magpies, or I picked up at a refugee association, or someone gave it me and I had that on me, and I was often wearing it at school, and the kids, you hang around and you talk about football and they say 'What team do you follow?' and I say I don't know. And they say you must be Port Magpies. And I say 'Yes, yes that's right' I didn't know what they were on about, so kids at school talked to me that way. So I followed Port Magpies, so it started from there. And you live here long enough, you see them play on TV and you follow them. So that's my hobby in terms of watching sport on TV, so typical you are watching sport on TV, so that's my hobby, that's the only time I've got.

**So would you describe that as a group you belong to, the Port Power fans?**

Yeah, I suppose, when you go to work people talk about football all the time, they talk about sport, so you have to follow football to get into conversation and talking about things and be involved with footie on a weekly basis. So it's mainly the work people that I hang around with, because you spend a lot of time with them.

**So having talked about that very Australian past-time, can I come back to that question about your Australian cultural background, and ask can you think of**

**anything else now is perhaps a tradition you perhaps practise from your Australian background?**

I never used to go down the pubs because I'm not used to it, but now if I need to catch up with friends I often say do you want to go down. It's not meant to be a pub bit it's a place where I drink, so that could be a café or could be a local park where we drink and talk about things, so is that a work thing or is that a tradition, I'm not sure, but I just notice that I do that quite a bit now. Like if I want to catch up with someone I say do you want to go for a drink? So I often have a light beer or coffee or whatever. So do you call that an Australian thing or not? Maybe not (laughs). Because, these days it is mainly about work.

**In the Australian manner perhaps. (both laugh)**

Yeah, so, and the things that they do in the workplace these days, I mentioned about the footie competition, everyone gets excited about it, and the Melbourne Cup. I don't usually get involved but it is just something that everyone gets involved on that day, so you sort of let's celebrate or let's join in, so all the things that people do, you tend to get involved because, I would say that.

**I am going to move on to one of our other themes now. Do you think there is a class system in Australia?**

I would say so. If people say no, then I don't believe that. I think everywhere there is a class system. You go into any society there is a class system, there's always rich people, there's always poor people, there's always people struggling. And in Australia it would be the same. There's a class system here. You go for a drive you know there are areas that are very good and there are areas that are very poor. So, we do have class system here.

**Where do you think you fit in the Australian class system?**

Well obviously there's people that are poor and struggling, they are struggling every day. I am involved with, I am currently President of St Vincent de Paul Society in my area, so there are people who are doing it really tough and there are people who are doing ok, they manage day by day to get by. And there are people who are comfortable I would say that are comfortable but still who are still middle class and people that are quite well off and they have high maintenance. I would say I am probably a bit below middle class. I wouldn't say I'm struggling, I wouldn't say I'm comfortable, but I'm ok.

**One of the questions I've got here as a sub-question is 'What school did you go to?'**

I came here and I went to Ferryden Park Primary School when I was in Year 7 and then I went to Adelaide High and then I went to University of South Australia. Yep, that's it.

**Do you think this says anything in particular about you, the schools that you went to?**

What was that?

**Do you think that the schools you went to says anything in particular about you?**

Oh, ok, yes I think so, because the High School I went to Adelaide High is a very multicultural school too. In terms of when I went there, there were a lot more Greek students, and I think there were a growing number of Asian students. That made me try to branch out with the Greek students and the Australian students and that's how they got me involved and that's how I got involved the cricket and the football and the soccer. I think that's how it started, my involvement, because I made friends through those sporting fields that I played. And yeah, it builds up from there.

**We put that question in because in talking to a few people and we received feedback that that's a question a lot of Adelaide people, or lot of South Australian people ask each other. We are trying to work out what it's meant to mean. The other question I have is 'What's your job?' which we have talked about. Do you think that says anything in particular about who you are?**

In some ways, because currently I have been working for the Minister for Further Education and I deal with, I advise him on international students the science and the information economy. The international student defines who I am because of my background and my involvements and I understand the issues reasonably. So, yes.

**Fantastic. My last question is a bit of a hard one and it's theoretical. If you had to pick one object or one image to put on display in the Migration Museum to represent you as a person, what would it be?**

Um, I would say if you have a photo of a group of people with different backgrounds that would be it, the object that I pick. It sort of represents the way my work, my involvement, involving a lot of things that I do that who I am today, so that would be the object I pick and put up that would define who I am. Like a typical ethnic person growing up involving with community activities.

**Well that covers everything that I had down but before we finish can it ask is there anything that you'd like to mention that I haven't thought of that you think is an important part of your identity or who you are?**

I'm sure there's a few, can't think now, can't remember what I've said. Yeah, there's quite a few things.

**We've touched on family and cultural background and place and different groups that you belong to. If there is anything else that you think of later you are welcome to get back to me at a later date.**

I have covered most things, yeah. Anything that you think you need to ask me, anything that I was a bit vague?

**That's all right, that's wonderful. Thanks very much for talking to me today.**

Thank you.

[end transcript – no further recording]