

Brother Simon-Hòa Phan
Narrator

Phước Thị Minh Trần
Interviewer

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Phước Thị Minh Trần - **PT**
Brother Simon-Hòa Phan - **BS**

My name is Phước Thị Minh Trần. I'm going to be conducting this interview. Today is Friday, October 22, 2010. I'm with Brother Simon-Hòa Phan in Bloomington, Minnesota.

PT: Good morning Brother Simon. How are you today?

BS: Good morning. I'm good, thank you.

PT: It's a long drive, right?

BS: Yes, it's about over an hour from Collegeville to Bloomington.

PT: Wow, well thank you very much for accepting my invitation and giving this interview. First do you have any questions for me regarding this interview?

BS: No. You just give me the questions and I try to answer.

PT: Wonderful! Now let's start the interview. Will you start the interview with your childhood?

BS: Talk about my childhood?

PT: Right. Your family, your parents, yourself, and your close relatives.

BS: Well I was born in 1964, right in the middle of the Vietnam War. I was born in Saigon; my parents were both from the North, they migrated South when the Communists took over the North so they came, they came down with the waves of the North Vietnamese to the South, and they got married down there and so six of my siblings and myself were born in Saigon... Childhood? We---My father was an air force officer for South Vietnam so we lived in the air force base, Tân Sơn Nhất, and that's during my ten years living in Vietnam that's where I lived, I went to school, and I went to church and that was all I know of Việt Nam. At times, my parents took us out to Saigon, outside the air force base, and we went to dinner and we went to movies, that was only once in a while, so my whole world in Việt Nam was mostly at the air force base, my friends, church, and school.

PT: So what was the best memory about living in the air force base?

BS: Best memory? I think it is the friends that I made and the time spent at school and in --- at church, we were a very religious catholic family. My parents were very strict actually, so we went to church every day, after school, the church, right? and then prayers in the evening before bed, but best memory was spending time with friends and just roaming around the air force base catching fishes in the---in the, in the sewer.

PT: Uh-huh, uh huh

BS: Yes, in the ponds and sewer, that was all I know at the air force base and it was a happy childhood until the end of the war, until we had to leave.

PT: Were you the youngest son in the family?

BS: No, I was the number five out of seven, yes, but the youngest son in the family.

PT: How about your grandparents?

BS: My---My paternal grandmother died before I was born, so was my maternal grandfather. So I only knew my father's father and my mother's mother who actually lived with us in the air force base. My grandma took care of us because my father was always working and my mother was not happy to be a housewife, so she went into business, so she ran a convenience store, right in front of the house.

PT: So in the base?

BS: In the base, right in the base. So we lived in the back of the store and the front, the front of the house is the store so it was all a happy childhood, just helping my mother to shelve the merchandises and to sell.

PT: Oh good! How about what was the worst memory of your childhood. I don't think you have any?

BS: No, not until a few days before the end of Vietnam War, before the fall of Saigon. By then school has already closed because the Communists, which was moving closer and closer to Saigon, and so everybody was afraid and so school closed. We stopped going to church too. There was something in the air. I was only 10 years old but I could feel something coming and it's coming to an end, something coming to an end, something new was going to happen, so I remembered my father called us together and he showed us, he gave each of us a bag. He had all of these because in each bag were some food, our papers, some money, and some clothing and he was ready, he said, "If anything happened, each one of you would have each bag to carry." I didn't know what was happening, fully understand what was happening, but you know ten years old, you had a sense. The day before we left the air force base, there were fighting, you could hear the gun, an explosion and right up in the air we saw two airplanes fighting, that was the day

before. Then that night I went to bed as usual and then the shelling of the bomb started right in the middle of the night, so the Communists which were just outside of Saigon, just outside of the air force base and there were just shelling, just random so just explosion after explosion, and just pit dark. We took shelter under our bed and it was one of the scariest moments in my childhood, just to hear the, the, the shells traveling the air that made the whistled noise, and then the explosion, right? Then the whole house shook the pictures on the wall and the cross in the wall fell down, we were screaming. My little sister who was only 8 years old was just screaming like mad and it continued on all night, all night and the next one. It stopped so we started to enter outside of the house and about two doors down one house got hit and I could see the rubble and my neighbor's bloody arm and bloody torso and my father decided then that we needed to leave the air force base. We took our bags and we left.

PT: So you guys all left together?

BS: Yes.

PT: By what?

BS: We had two motorbikes and one of them, we used to, to pull a little cart, we put all our belongings on that cart and we actually did not ride. We walked, we walked outside the gate and into the city and it was that time chaos, it was people running all over, smokes on the horizon and we took refuge in the American embassy where ---where my father worked.

PT: So that meant you were 10 years old when you left Việt Nam?

BS: Uh-huh,uh-huh.

PT: So where did you first arrive when you left Việt Nam? At that time you went into the embassy? What was that?

BS: Yes, in the ---in the embassy. My father learned that they were evacuating people off the roof top by helicopter. So we decided--- then he decided to leave because he was an officer in the air force so there was a good chance that he would get arrested by the Communist government, so he decided to leave then. So we went up onto the roof top, we fought our way to the crowd and it was just a crowd and the helicopter path. I remembered we're making a line going up to the stairs and into the balcony on the roof top and my father--- my sister and I got kind of pushed behind so we're fighting this crowd and everybody was on, was on the helicopter, except my sister and I. So my father had to go back and fought the crowd [laughter] and pulled us out of the crowd and entered the helicopter and it was just chaos, it was just panic, it was about fear. When I got into the helicopter, I noticed with our family--- my family, there was a young couple with a little child also riding that trip, so they--- we took off and I looked down from the helicopter and the fire and smoke all over, all over the city. That was the last image of Việt Nam of my childhood.

PT: Uh, it was terrible, right?

BS: Yes, yes. Then we were taken into an aircraft carrier so we stayed there for the night, well,--for the evening and that night, they transferred us to the big ship, but that transfer on this small boat was also another horrible experience because there was seasick, there was gun firing all over the air, there was shouting, there was just black and the boat was riding the waves up and down, there was that feeling of the sick and gunfire, and shouting, and it was just dark, it was just horrible memories.

PT: How long did you stay on the boat?

BS: We---from the boat we were transferred to a big ship and that ship was a big, big, big ship. We just---we got on and we just found a space, a little, probably on the balcony, it was about 5 feet wide for nine of us to settle down, and that's where we stayed for one week. So we spread out the mat and we slept there. Each day they gave us a dish, a plate of rice, sometimes just plain rice, sometimes with mixed tomatoes, canned tomatoes. And that was all we had for food. My father by that time had decided to throw everything away that we brought, so we had only one bag with us and the clothing that we were wearing on our back. So the one bag had all our papers and a couple of dry ramen noodles [laughs]. That was it and some money [and some more laughs].

PT: Very convenient, right?

BS: [laughs] Yes and some money. So we all depended on the food they gave us on the ship and it wasn't so much.

PT: So you have six people, like six siblings and your daddy and your mommy, eight people, right?

BS: Nine people together.

PT: And who was the ninth one? Six siblings and you two.

BS: I am the ninth.

PT: Six siblings

BS: Yes, six siblings

PT: So seven people in the family?

BS: Yes, seven of the children. My grandmother was with us until that, that evening, that, that night of the shelling, but when we left the air force base and she decided she wanted to go to my aunt's house. So she was very close to coming with us and that was the big regret for my mother and my father.

PT: So where is she now?

BS: She died since...

PT: In Việt Nam?

BS: In Việt Nam, she died ten years after the end of the war.

PT: And tell me the day when you first came to the United States?

BS: First day in the United States? So we went to the refugee camp in Guam and then Camp Pendleton in California so my father---I remembered at Camp Pendleton- my father was talking about where should we go after the, the camp. They gave us a choice of Florida, California and Colorado and I remembered going to the map, the United States map, and trying to find out where these places were and I couldn't pronounce California; it was a strange long word, but Florida was easier to pronounce, and Colorado you know was easier. So we would imagine what our life would be but finally my father decided that, that he, he wanted to go to Denver, Colorado... The bishop Charles Evans and the diocese there wanted to sponsor the Vietnamese refugees. So...we went to Denver, we got on the airplane, landed at the Denver airport around 8 o'clock at night, it was August, August 9. It was very dark, right? So from the airport we, we, we got on two or three cars. I remembered the bishop was there with us. Some of the parishioners from the nearby church volunteered to drive and so I remembered getting in the car and [they] drove [us] to the apartment right near Central Denver. I stepped out the car and got into the apartment--- into the apartment and then they said, "This is your house now," and we ran around and explored the apartment two stories, three rooms, only one bathroom. So I said, "Is this our house now?" to my parents and my parents said yes. I didn't speak English then. And they showed us the refrigerator. I remembered opening the refrigerator and it was packed full of food and I said, "Is it ours too?" [laughs]

PT: Uh, happy, right? [laughs]

BS: [laughter] Yes, I remembered seeing plums, we had plums in Việt Nam and oranges, beautiful oranges and I said, "Is it all ours?" and my parents said yes. I remembered going to bed and sharing the bed with, with my brother so the three boys staying in one room, the four girls in the other room, my parents in one room. And the next morning, I couldn't wait to get up so I got up and, since it was dark the night before I couldn't explore outside; so in the morning I ran down and opened the door and I explored the surroundings and the first thing I noticed was grass, green grass, right?

PT: Oh, lovely.

BS: And the sidewalks, yes, it's just beautiful green grass and sidewalks so clean, big buildings, apartment buildings, so that was my first memory of the United States.

PT: Uh.

BS: Beside camp Pendleton.

PT: So where are your parents and siblings living now?

BS: We lived in Denver for three years and my parents could not stand the ---the cold winter so they decided to move to California where one of our aunts lived and so we reunited with her and stayed in California. It was 1978 so they have been there since then.

PT: Oh; they're still there now?

BS: Yes, they're still there now.

PT: What...

BS: And all my siblings were there.

PT: What makes you come here to Minnesota? Because of school or monastery?

BS: It was monastery. I was 27 when I decided to join the monastery so---yes.

PT: Would you tell me a little bit more about the life in monastery? Was your family supportive of your decision to become a monk? And how so?

BS: Well, earlier in high school and in college, actually I was training to be a priest and they were very supportive of that, of me to be in the seminary, to be trained to be a priest. But then I decided to leave that, that kind of ministry. I was in ordain then because that kind of life I didn't think it fitted me very well; so they were disappointed that I stopped my seminary training and then I went home. Three years later I joined the monastery. It was, it was close to being a priest, but they still, especially my father always dreamed, dreaming about me someday being a priest. But being a monk is close to that, it's not really a priest, a monk can be a priest, but I decided not to, I wanted to remain a brother. But priest or brother or monk had the same vows, right? The second regret, disappointment [laughter]--- how funny is that?---Minnesota was so far from California, so they were--- I was not close, but I go back to California to visit them every summer.

PT: Every summer? Good, good, good. How many years of education have you completed?

BS: Education?

PT: Yes.

BS: 4 years in college and I studied philosophy, that was in the seminary and 3 years of philosophy, that was also in the seminary, and then left. Later I joined the monastery and the

monastery sent me out to get a Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting and a Masters of Fine Arts in film and video.

PT: Can you tell me a little bit more about the movie “Mother Tongue, Father Land.” I know it is famous all around the nation. Could you tell more a little bit about the movie and why you decided to interview the Amerasians?

BS: Well. “Mother Tongue, Father Land” in Vietnamese called “Tiếng Mẹ Trên Đất Cha” was my master’s thesis in graduate school. It was a film I made before I graduated. I decided on the topic of the Vietnamese Amerasians, which is people born of the American soldiers and Vietnamese women during the war.

BS: Okay. So, let’s talk about the Amerasians. Well, my first experience of Amerasians was actually in the air force base in Việt Nam, in Saigon. I had a---a great school buddy who I hanged around with a lot. One day I went to his house to play and I discovered there was a little baby hidden in the house, and a beautiful baby, blond hair, blue eyes and I figured out that was the daughter of my friend’s sister, right? I was ten years old and I didn’t know about taboos and things like that, but, but I could sense the love together with the shame surrounding this baby. She was sitting in the house, she wasn’t brought out in the public so I until to this day I didn’t know what took place between my friend’s sister and the American soldier. I didn’t know any details about that. That was my first image of that, of the image of the Amerasian, of somebody, a Vietnamese who looked American, right? Then 25 years later, I went back to Vietnam for the first time since I left after the war. My first visit back to Việt Nam, as I was traveling on the streets of Saigon, I saw a woman with blond hair selling noodles on the street and that brought back the memory of that baby and I was just, just wondering in my mind what is her story, what’s--- who is she, why she is still here? So that caused me to explore the topic and I decided that would be an interesting topic for my MFA thesis to do a documentary film on the Amerasians.

PT: Did you have a chance to talk to her, that day?

BS: Not that woman, not that day. It was so fast, I was at stop sign and I was riding on the back of the motorbike and I just looked over and I saw her, and then the green light, and we went. But, but I did have a chance to meet a lot of Amerasians, Vietnamese Amerasians in the US, which was the focus of the film. So I--- through the introduction by priests, nuns, and social workers, I met these Vietnamese Amerasians who live in California, Minnesota, Iowa, New York, and Washington D.C. Those are the locations I have connection to so I was introduced to these--- And we just sat down with the camera and they told me their stories. And some of those stories, they said that they never told to anybody. Very candid, very open, very honest sharing of their struggle of being different from the Vietnamese society, being abandoned by their fathers, the American father and rejected by their own people, the Vietnamese, so they’re always on the fringe, on the fringe, on the outside of the mainstream Vietnamese community and they don’t

really fit in with the American community either because they were brought up in Vietnam. But they spoke Vietnamese, right? They didn't know any English until they came here and they experienced prejudice on both sides, American and Vietnamese, persecuted by the Communist government because they are children of the enemies so it was a tremendous learning experience for me. I realize my prejudices and I learned from them and, and I won their trust and collected their stories and so I put together a documentary film.

PT: At first, did you have any difficulties to approach them for the documentary movie?

BS: Yes, yes. They didn't trust me at first. No I was not Amerasian and they said, "Why do you want to hear my story. Nobody asks me about this before?" But it was through the--- the priests and nuns, and social workers who were their friends so they started to trust me and then realized that I wanted to hear their stories. It was a big risk to open themselves up and to the stranger and that group had done all kinds of things for this footage. What they told me and it was yes, it was a risk; but once they started to trust me, then they invited their own friends to come over and talked. So from one or two Amerasians, now I had the whole group, a dozen of Amerasians who were friends, so there was no lack of number of Amerasians to talk to.

PT: Wonderful! But I heard you may have another one, another movie coming soon or what's the project?

BS: Yes, I have the second part to this topic of Vietnamese Amerasians, so the first one was about those who settled in the US, the second one which I have already gone back the second time to Vietnam and shot this footage and interviewed around 25 Amerasians and the topic is about why they are still in Vietnam trying to claim their place in the land of their father in the United States. So there was in 2006 I went back the second time to Vietnam and interviewed these people so I have the footage which I will next week leave to California on sabbatical, sit down and look at this interview on video. I try to piece together a documentary film.

PT: Are we expected to have it next year? Or?

BS: Hopefully! Hopefully! I can, I can move ahead with this project.

PT: Good! And now who was the biggest influence in your career? Why did you select, to become the art professor like the media, and art and anything?

BS: You talked about my career as a film maker and a professor?

PT: Yes.

BS: And I would add to that as a monk also because all three intertwine together.

PT: Yes.

BS: Being a monk inspires my art work and guides my teaching and I can't be a professor without being a filmmaker or an artist. Because it's what I share with my students, right? And so the person who inspires

PT: Yes. Who was the biggest influence in your career as a monk, a professor....

BS: [laughs]

PT: ...A painter and a producer?

BS: [laughs] Wow. Well, let talk about being a monk. I think the one person who was important in my first few years as a monk in formation actually was my formation director, Father Rene McGraw. He is a good listener, he is--- and so he was also my spirit director. He has been in the monastery for decades and he's also a professor. He's teaching us philosophy, he is a faculty residence who lives in the dorm with college students and guides them in that ministry. He's just a tremendously... Holy Man but very human at the same time, so he was very important to me in my first years in the monastery. Let see influences as an art filmmaker? Well I love the Russian filmmaker Andre Tarkovsky who made spiritual films, but not religious in a sense of that is Catholic or Russian Orthodox, and so on. But his characters struggled with spiritual issues and personal issues, and social issues at the same time and just beautiful films, but one of them for example is the sacrifice about this father and husband who started out the day of his birthday surrounded by his family but by the end of the day, by the end of the film, he destroyed the house, went crazy, vowed not to speak to anybody. Yes, you had to see the film to understand why...

PT: [laughs] Interesting, right?

BS: Why he did that or the second--- then another film by Tarkovsky is Nostalgia, which is more about spiritual struggle. I just loved that ---its narrative. I made the documentary and experimented film, but narrative films sometimes when they are great, they address important issues and I can relate to those issues with these films by Tarkovsky. The monastery first actually sent me out to do a degree in painting, not in film. I started out as an artist first, but then I discovered that when I addressed my memory of Vietnam in the war, painting was not just enough for me. I had to have sounds, I had to have moving images, so that's why I tried video and discovered that video is a medium that's much more effective of what I wanted to say, so I changed my major. Anyway so during first--- those first video classes, film history, video production, some of the people that influenced in what I wanted to do with film. One of them is... Chantal Akerman, a Belgium filmmaker, experimental film maker, beautiful self-reflective film, Jean-Luc Godard ...

PT: Yes. I know this one.

BS: French Newwave.

PT: Yes.

BS: His earlier films, Robert Kramer, an American filmmaker, documentary, actually made a couple of films about Vietnam. Let see, I try to make sure it's Kramer, I think Robert Kramer. Anyway, those are the few, there are so many filmmakers that I respect and admire and love, love their work. Professor? You know I just finished my seven years of teaching and I learn a little bit from everybody, that I come in contact, my colleagues so there was no one particular person, but I---when I observe somebody doing something, even my professor, I pick up what's good about their teaching, what's good about them and I try to apply to myself.

BS: And I like that, I like doing that, yes.

PT: Good and so do you have a lot of students in your class, like any Vietnamese students?

BS: No [laughter]

PT: No? [laughter]

BS : Because Saint John's and Saint Ben, Saint John's University and Saint Ben College of Benedict; well we have very few international students; the number is growing year by year. But so far I only have, I only have one Vietnamese student in my seven years of teaching and she is not actually directly from Vietnam. She came [here] as a child, a young child and has been living here with her family for a while. The Vietnamese students who come here directly from Vietnam study abroad, their majors are not arts [laughs]

PT: Yes, Not French [laughs], but doctors...

BS: Yes! More finances, management, so art is not very practical for them or their parents.

PT: Yes. Because you can see our tradition.

BS: Yes.

PT: Can you talk a little bit about the Vietnamese values? Do you still keep now?

BS: Vietnamese?

PT: Values like traditions.

BS: Values like traditions.

PT: How do you define it?

BS: In my life, in my teaching, and all that?

PT: Yes

BS: ...I think family is very important and I think that it is also important in the monastic life, family and community, you know, you put family first or community first and that is also what I try to teach my students. Film making is that community effort. It's group effort, right?

PT: Yes, everybody has a say to it, right?

BS: Yes, yes, yes and I assign a lot of group projects to my students and sometimes personality clashes, sometimes things don't work out as a group but I try to say to my students "Stick with it, compromise, work it out." And most of the time it works, most of the time they put the efforts into the project as a group, it works; sometimes it's just no, there was no saving, there was no hope, right?

PT: [laughs]

BS: And, and that's okay, that's okay. But I try to teach my students that when they graduated from college, you go out there, a lot of work, a lot of jobs depend on groups, right? Group efforts.

PT: Teamwork.

BS: Teamwork, yes, yes and so they had to learn, to learn in their early years.

PR: Now what accomplishments are you most proud of?

BS: Accomplishments? I think I have been in the monastery for 19 years now and I think that's accomplishment, you know and it's not, it's not easy at---it's good but sometimes it's difficult to live a life that is countercultural, different from the majority of, of, of the society and so I think through the grace of God that I survive this [laughs] this far. Survive, no not survive, I thrive another accomplishment is film making. I think I came to that area later in life and so I have to work a little bit harder because I was in my thirties when I started to learn film making compared to my classmates to learn it in their early twenties, so that's an accomplishment. Teaching? I got tenure as the professor so that's a big step to overcome and maybe hopefully what I'm doing is important of contributing to the Vietnamese community, which is important to me, because I'm, I will always be Vietnamese either a monk or a filmmaker or a professor. Vietnamese is a part of me and influences on what I do also.

PT: As you mentioned one time, you use art as a Vietnamese heritage celebration. Can you tell me a little more about it?

BS: Yes! My---most of my films about Việt Nam, about Vietnamese heritage, about the war or all the results of ,of war and those are things that I feel strongly about, right? I have done films about American topics, but I feel closer to the topics I'm doing with Việt Nam so... [Interview interruption] I hope that the films I'm making or even my paintings celebrate that, celebrate Vietnam, celebrate the cultures and the people, retelling the war and the struggle in the past, but

also addressing topics that are in the present day as the results of all of that like Vietnamese Amerasians, still living and struggling and as an artist, you ---or I can, I can work on any project unless I somehow can relate to that, to the topic; even with the Amerasians, I am not Amerasian, but I can feel related to be a minority coming to a land with people, culture, and language different from my, my own, my own and experience prejudices, all of that I can relate to, not be the Amerasian itself, but you know struggle with all those issues so, so, so...so the films I made and the paintings that I painted, I have somehow connected in some way so I can---then I can have empathy and be able to dig deeper and to see deeper and to do something about it, add images, or sounds or...

PT: Right. Talk about the film, you know “Mother Tongue, Father Land”. I know it travels almost in many states, right? I know in academic institutions, they did use the movie as a hot topic for discussion, right? Can you tell me a little bit more about your experiences when you were there?

BS: Yes! It’s the---the film has been traveling around the country, both films festivals and, and colleges and academic institutions. Each audience, each community is different when they received the film--- in receiving the film. Yes, the common reaction from both Vietnamese and American communities is that they did not know about the topic, they’re just buried with the war, right? And so even my sister [laughs]...

PT: [laughs]

BS: After seeing the film, she said, “I am used to making fun of Amerasians when I was younger.” [laughs]

PT: [laughs] Yes.

BS: My own sister [laughter] and so she said, “I didn’t know they struggled so much.” So that were some of the common, common reactions to the film. It is an important part of the Vietnamese history, but also the American history because that had to do of those American soldiers.

PT: Yes

BS: Right, right. So that’s connection everything to the two countries, two people. Yes I hope that the film will help in the studies of the American history and the Vietnamese history.

PT: Good, now you mentioned earlier about prejudices, did you experience any prejudices in life?

BS: Against.

PT: Not against, like discrimination or something.

BS: Oh yes, yes, yes; it's just small thing; not at St. John's or St. Ben, not in the monastery, not as a faculty but as a student in both undergraduate and graduate schools, or even St. Cloud when I came about 20 years ago, minority group is very, very small, so if you go to the market or on the streets, you can see---or I could feel that uncomfortableness, people uncomfortable with minority people and some still are now.

PT: Oh, oh!

BS: Yes, yes even in St Cloud, but it's better, it has been better, not so much in the metropolitan area like the Twin Cities, but students encountering in the rural area, you know

PT: What are the main lessons you've learned in life? As you travel a lot, you're teaching, you have done a lot of things. What are the main lessons you have learned in life?

BS: Main lessons I've learned in life is a big question.

PT: Yes, oh friend, you can say anything you like

BS: Well, well, I think my faith, my family, and community are very important to me and those are the big lessons for me, to be less self centered, less individualistic, and to depend less on yourself and more on others and on God and I think all my accomplishments were very dependent on people and community and God. By myself I couldn't, I couldn't do it.

PT: But I think you share a lot to, I remembered when you came to the Vietnam Culture camp when you showed the movie and you shared a lot of things, people did ask a lot of good questions, how do you feel about it when you have the movie come out, you know, touch many people's heart?

BS: Yes, yes, it's, it's---that cries and happy moments when you see your work affects people. That---I remembered showing my work in California and this older Vietnamese man who sat in front of the theater, in the front row and I, I could see he was crying while watching the film and to touch something like that is a tremendous experience and you know that people who told me that the film really touched them so---or even teaching young people in college, they came back and said, "I really respect and value what you taught me when I was still in college." So those are moments that make my work worth it.

PT: Yes, good. Because I know you help a lot of people in the community too, like for example we have a big event at the Mall of America, you did a wonderful slide show.

BS: Yes, yes, yes, it's not much what, what I can do best to put together images, slides or film, or video, you know, each, each, each of us can contribute to what we can do best...

PT: Yes, Yes.

BS: And we can accomplish a lot.

PT: Right? Now so are there any words of wisdom you would like to pass along to the audience or to the students, everybody? [laughs]

BS: Words of wisdom! Oh my gosh! No, not that wise. Well as mentioned before, I'm proud of my heritage, of the Vietnamese heritage, and I celebrate, I present it, I show it through my work, in film, in paintings, sometimes in my teaching and it's not all, not just all good things and bad things that have to do with our culture, our history, but they are part of us, right? Good or bad, happy or sad, they're parts of us, they--- all of that make me who I am now, the good and the bad and I try to celebrate all that in my film, in my art. I hope that more young people who are growing up, who try to address all those issues themselves either bilingual or bicultural or you know acting themselves who I am, where do I belong, be inspired; those people can be inspired to talk about their own experiences, maybe through their art, through their writings, or whatever, the creative way to express themselves and I hope that happens. And I see it happened with my students.

PT: Okay. You know what's amazed a lot about you, when you speak Vietnamese, I know you came here at young age, ten years old when you left Việt Nam, but how do you still keep the traditions, you speak Vietnamese very well, not only speaking, but writing, expressing your feelings as well. So tell me more about this one, because a lot of people want to know, to learn.

BS: No, my Vietnamese is not as good as my English. I realize it's strange, it's a strange transformation. When I was in college, in my twenties, I was struggling with my Vietnamese language even though we spoke Vietnamese in my family the whole time, my, my parents and my siblings, we all speak Vietnamese at home. Only later when the second generation was born, my nieces, my nephews, we speak more English to them, but my siblings try to teach Vietnamese to their children so their children can understand. But they really don't speak Vietnamese. So, so for myself, it's strange. Then I left home to go to school, college and graduate school, and then monastery. All those years up until now, I live with mostly Americans, and I speak English most of the time. But lately I just notice in myself that Vietnamese language come easier, for some reasons. Even though I don't use it in my daily, daily life; it just comes, comes back. It's very strange, I don't know, I don't know how that is.

PT: Yes

BS: So now I can sit down, I have done this, I can sit down at the interview. The last one in the cable TV, the Vietnamese cable TV station program and I could carry the conversation in Vietnamese and less and less self-conscious, less stumbling [laughter] with the language so it comes back for some reasons, it comes back, it comes back.

PT: It's like a miracle!

BS: Yes, yes, yes! That's great and I am proud of that. It's amazing! Yes.

PT: Good. Now what does your future hold?

BS: I don't know...

PT: [laughter]

BS: What future holds? I get myself teaching for a while. But in the monastery you never know because monks can be called to take on projects, take on roles, jobs and so on. So I cannot say that I'll be teaching the rest of my life or making film the rest of my life. [laughter]

PT: Who decides to move you from one project to another one?

BS: The abbot, the superior of the monastery is the abbot. But nowadays--- in the old days, the abbot tells you what to do, right and you do it; but nowadays it's more of the dialogue of, of--- agreed between the individual monk and the abbot, so the abbot can make anybody do anything or one should not be doing something that one does not like or be terrible at it, right?

PT: [laughs].

BS: So yes, so I don't know, I don't know, but I hope to continue on being part of the Vietnamese community helping in a way; I can be a teacher and live a life of a monk.

PT: Brother Simon, I would like to know more about a daily life in the monastery?

BS: What is that like in the monastery? We pray, we come together in the church. We pray four times a day: morning, mid-day, afternoon and evening. We also come together to eat together so breakfast, lunch and dinner. Our breakfast is very open so that's a daily life and then we each have our own work schedule, but we all try to stop for mid-day's prayer at noon and then church at 5 o' clock. So our work day ends by 5 o' clock. All of us teach in the evening so we sometimes miss some of these prayers but overall we try to---I try to stick to the schedule; it is considered by most people strict observance life, monastic life. Benedictines can vary in the various application of monastic life but our house at Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, we are more active, we are not close, we are not---, we don't live behind closed doors and are detached from the rest of the society. We run a grad school, a high school, a publishing house. And we teach in the college and then the others go out and work in the churches, in parishes in Minnesota. So we are very open and active community and that's why I like, I like the structure's life with community and prayers; at the same time I like to be part of a lot of communities, so teaching is that and also working with the Vietnamese community in Minnesota is also a help to reach out to outside the community.

PT: Did you have any advice to the younger generation in here? Like I know a lot of students admire you and look up on you, you have any good advice to them?

BS: Just back to words of wisdom [laughs]

PT: [laughs] Words of wisdom, yes [laughs]

BS: Advice to the young people. You know when I teach video and film to my students, I often tell them to talk about their own experiences and not try to do anything just too big or too complex or outside of themselves and often I see students' projects that are effective, moving, beautiful usually come from the students themselves. So for example one student made a beautiful piece of art of his own experiences of near drowning when he was a little boy, it was raw, it was emotional but beautiful at the same time. So yes, I would encourage young people to express their own experiences on their own thoughts, on their own conviction. It must more effective that way rather than trying to address big problem like war in Iran, Iraq or global economy, or just big things, but to maybe address those issues with their own experiences, with their own conviction so that...

PT: And I bet they listen to you, right? [laughs]

BS: Yes, well, yes, normally yes.

PT: Do you have any more questions or do you have anything you want to share with me?

BS: I think that's enough.

PT: That's enough! [laughs]

BS: [laughs]

PT: Thank you very much for giving this interview and I wish you success in your work.

BS: Thank you, thank you for the opportunity and I hope this is helpful for anybody [laughs]

PT: Yes, we have learned a lot from you. Thank you again.

BS: Thank you. Oh, one more thing I need to add: Simon-Hòa Phan is my religious name. I was born as Cường Phan, Cường is my Vietnamese name, so it's still my legal name. Cường, actually Phan Đình Cường is the name I was born with. Now in the Vietnamese Catholic community as a baby--- when the baby was baptized in the Catholic church, the baby was given a religious name and so Simon-Hòa was given to me by my parents, Simon-Hòa is a Saint and actually a Vietnamese martyr, a Vietnamese Saint and so I adopted Simon-Hòa as my religious name when I entered the monastery, so in the monastery and at St John's University, at St Ben's, they know me by my religious name, which is Simon-Hòa Phan. But my family and Vietnamese friends still call me Cường.

PT: Yes, a lot of interesting, right? Yes. Do you have a meaning of your name? I know in Vietnamese traditions, naming a child has always a meaning, right?

BS: Cường, I don't know...

Is that, is that strength? It's that what it means?

PT: Yes, it's correct, you know.

BS: Yes, yes [laughs], thank you.

PT: Thank you again, very welcome.

Vietnamese Community Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society