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Interviewee: Suzanne Chew
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Abstract:

Vietnam War immigrant Suzanne Chew briefly describes her passage from Vietnam to the United States, the traditions she has kept from her homeland, and America's influence on her and her family. She starts off with her journey from Vietnam to Paris and then to the United States. Her first home in America was in California, and she describes the big Asian community in Los Angeles.

Continuing, Suzanne talks about her decisions to move from California to Texas and describes the Vietnamese – Chinese cultures in Houston. For example, Milam is a good place to find nearly authentic Vietnamese foods. The interview also covers how American customs have influenced her Vietnamese – Chinese traditions. She explains that since Houston has a larger variety of food, like burgers and pizza, Chinese food is not eaten as often. She also discusses smaller cemetery ceremonies and visits and compares American wedding traditions to Chinese ones. Furthermore, Lunar New Year is more condensed in Houston than in Vietnam or China. She does say that the Chinese – Vietnamese community in Houston is expanding.

In the later part of the interview, Suzanne describes her recent trip to Vietnam. She states that Vietnam has also become Americanized in the cities but not as much in the countryside.

JC: This is Jessica Chew interviewing Suzanne Chew on March 8th, 2015 at her house. Hi! I would like to ask about your history, if that's all right. Can you tell me a little about where you were born and where your ancestors were from?

SC: Yes. I was born in Vietnam on January 1st, 1960. My parent and grandparent were born in Kantong, China. I have three older sibling, also born in China. My two younger sibling were born in Vietnam also. They came to Vietnam from China to learn oil business, open gas station, and body shop there.

JC: Okay, can you tell me what it was like there in Vietnam? I know that the war was just starting. Could you tell me a little bit about that?

SC: Before I were born, there always a war there and then Dung and I were born and then the war from 1960 that I know when I was a child and to 1974, when we left, and they all were bombing every night. We just hear bombing and the street always sirens, so every night we have to either go down to the basement and every time the siren coming, a bomb. So, our house, we have a basement; we'd have to go underneath to the basement to sleep there. Sometimes, the siren in the street and the kids have to get out of the school and to go home because the school was shut down.

JC: What were your emotions during that time? It sounds very scary.

SC: Sometimes, we see a lot of war people from the north and go down to the south because more in the village-side, countryside, the Viet Cong come to kill more of the village people. They want them to join them and they go down to the city and some go more to the beach because they have a boat. They escape from the boat. Sometimes you go to the beach, you see

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bodies floating there or in the countryside, wherever you go and you see some dead body. So, really fighting, scary.

JC: Were you or your parents involved with the war?

SC: No. My parents were in business and my uncle with the government, with Nguyen Van Thieu, the president back in that time in during the war.

JC: Okay. So, when did you leave Vietnam? You said “1974?” Where did you go from there?

SC: In 1974, my family were with my uncle because Nguyen Van Thieu, the president of Vietnam, leave to go to London with his daughter and then my uncle and us, we go to Paris. In a helicopter.

JC: By helicopter?

SC: Yes. The military helicopter.

JC: That's interesting. What was it like in Paris? Was it hard learning the French or the English? How was it? On arrival.

SC: Not good, because in Vietnam, we were in international school. We were learning in that international school they teach, because Vietnam is a French colony. So, most people there, they spoke French, the old generation. The new generation, they either speak in Vietnamese, Chinese, and that's it. But the old generation, they mostly people speak French. We went to international, we speaking a little bit English and French and Chinese. So, we went to France, we didn't have a problem with that because we already spoke the language.

JC: How long were you in France?

SC: I was in France for about six months.

JC: Where did you go after that?

SC: After that, we came to the United States of America, as immigrants.

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JC: Where in the states did you enter and how was the process?

SC: Because my two older brothers, they came here because they want... We have uncle living in the States, he live in New York and then he want us to move over here. He say it's better to stay in America. They say, "When Vietnam lose, most people will come to Guam and United States as refugees, so United States were supporting you more than French." So, that's why we came and when we came since we're not a refugee, so we had to be immigrants to the United States. Then, we came here and we live in Needles, Texas. We came here and then my uncle introduce us to restaurant owner, it's a friend of my uncle's in Needles, California. So, we live in Needles, California for a while.

JC: So, you came to California first?

SC: Yes.

JC: Okay. So, once you were in California, how was the Asian community there?

SC: We live in Needles, California, it wasn't have any Asian there at all. Mostly, it's American Indian. We stayed there for about three months and then my mom's brother live in L.A. They were immigrant, refugee come in 1975 and they were live in Los Angeles. So, they told us, "You need to come to L.A., is more Asians there than live in Needles."

JC: Was your whole family able to come with you?

SC: Yes. My whole family would came.

JC: So, once you were in L.A., how was the Chinese culture there or Vietnamese culture? You said there were more Asian people there?

SC: When we were move to L.A., it's a big Chinatown in Los Angeles. Back then it wasn't any Vietnamese at all. It's mostly Chinatown because those people come to L.A. [from] around the

world like most mainly in China and Hong Kong or Taiwan. So, it not much Vietnamese there and refugee, I think they most split-up.

JC: Did you have any difficulty fitting in with that community there in California? Like, how was it, how were your emotions? What was it like?

SC: In the Asian community, because we speaking the language, it wasn't any difficulty for us. But in the school, when I was entering the middle school, the Arcadia Middle School and I have a difficulty to fit in because I'm Asian and the most school there is Hispanic. Because California, part of it, and the part that we were living in, the people they is half white and half Hispanic, and they either speaking Spanish or English and we just a little bit in English. So, we really have a hard time and they put us in the ESL but, actually, it not like ESL nowadays, English and Chinese or English and Vietnamese. They were English and Spanish. So, we really have a difficulty time to learn.

JC: How long were you in California and when did you decide to move to Texas?

SC: I live in California from 1975 to 1981.

JC: And when did you come to Texas?

SC: My second brother from 1979 to 1981, he have a body shop here, he moving down here. He speaking trilingual and a lot of Vietnamese here doing like fishing boats and stuff like that and mechanical because he really good at mechanical. So, he open a body shop and he told my parent is Texas a good place to live for younger sibling. So, back then, I already graduated and also my two younger brother and he say California got too many gang. So, move to Texas, it better. So, we moving down to Houston in 1981 and we live in Clear Lake area.

JC: So, was it just you and your brother that came to Houston?

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SC: Yes, my parents still live in Los Angeles. Just only my two younger siblings and I were moving down here.

JC: Okay. So, you said the Vietnamese culture here had a lot of the shrimp boat business and so that's why your brother did the mechanics?

SC: Mhm, mechanic.

JC: What about the Chinese culture here? How was it when you first arrived?

SC: Okay, in 1981 when I first arrived, there wasn't much Chinese culture here, like at the Bellaire area now. It nothing there, just American, just more American, no Chinese, no Vietnamese town, no Asian town at all, overall. Only the little Chinatown in here, it's on Chinatown like where the George Brown Convention Center. It's a Leyland area in downtown. That's a little Chinatown right there and it called "Asiantown." They combined Vietnamese and Chinese and little theater and just a couple Chinese restaurants. Most the Vietnamese people, they come here, they doing fisherman. So, compared to now in Houston, for thirty years later, and they moved from Chinatown, now it's closed down and they moved to Milam. Milam still have a lot of Vietnamese live there if you want to eat authentic Vietnamese food, then that's what the Milam area is, all the Vietnamese people. The grocery stores, most of them now is moved to Bellaire and the Vietnamese town, Asian town used to be, in 1981, in Houston and downtown, now closed down. Now, they moving all around Houston, not in North Houston and Bellaire area and Milam area and also in League City area. It's huge in Houston, it's really big.

JC: You said that down on Milam, the Vietnamese food was really authentic?

SC: Yes.

JC: Would you say it's similar to what you had in Vietnam? Do you think it's reached that level?

SC: It pretty close. It not reach that level, but it pretty close.

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JC: Pretty close?

SC: Pretty close.

JC: Do you think it will ever reach the level?

SC: No, because they more just like Tex-Mex and Asian-Mix, Chinese-Mix because they cannot be too authentic.

JC: Why do you think that?

SC: Because I don't think American will eat anchovy sauce.

JC: What is anchovy sauce?

SC: Anchovy sauce means they using fish, the little fish, and shrimp paste mixed with fish sauce and dipping sauce. So, they using like fish sauce, but dipping like egg rolls, spring rolls. You dipping sauce. In Vietnam, they using everything anchovy sauce and paste. And they cooking with shrimp paste and fish paste, cook everything with fish sauce. Here they cooking differently.

JC: On living in the states, how has the American customs influenced your life? Like, raising a first-generation American family and keeping up with customs?

SC: Well, it depend on the family. When my parent is a first-generation raising us, because we wasn't born here, we just live here when a little child. So, we still listen to our parents and we speaking the language and we still eating the food like we eating Asian food at home and once in a while we go out with a parent, our parent, we still eating Asian food because apparently American like eating a burger or eating Tex-Mex, anything. So, even we at home, we eat Asian food. We go out, we still eat Asian food. But in second-generation, when my generation now, I'm raising my kid at home, we eating variety food, we don't eating like Chinese food at home, we go out eat Chinese food. We eat American food, we eat burger, we eat pizza, at home we

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cook pasta, everything. It completely different from the first generation and the second generation.

JC: So, the foods have changed. What about some of the customs you celebrate?

SC: The custom with my parent, for example, every culture parent believe, they ancestor, they've all turned they home, every morning they burn incense or they calling the ancestor for breakfast, lunch, and dinner then burning incense. They believe in Buddha, they worship Buddha, they go temple. And every first of the month and the 15th they vegetarian. And some people, they Catholic, they go to the church and some, they go to the temple. They want to believe what they believe in. In our generation, when we grow up, it's freedom of speech and freedom of belief because the country, we believe it in everything, it's different. You cannot force your kid to believe what you believe anymore in your tradition. So, everything is change.

JC: So, your religion has changed since you came to the states?

SC: Yes.

JC: And you taught that to your children?

SC: Well, I since my parent when they been here and they live and they look and they see everything because the change is good, didn't mean it bad. So, my parent is an truly, really tradition people, but they believe in Buddha and they thought Christian wasn't bad at all so they let my siblings believe and to become, so I become a Christian instead of a Buddha like my parent. So, I let just like my children, whoever they want to believe. So, they have a freedom of choice, if they want to believe who they want to believe.

JC: Besides religion, what kind of other cultural customs have you practiced since you've been in the states? Is there anything similar from the Vietnamese – Chinese culture that you still practice here?

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SC: I, still, even changing my customs from Buddha to Christian but I still have my parent tradition like a death of the family, a funeral stuff, I still have to follow my ancestor, my grandparent, my parent. We still have to follow the tradition with the funeral, we have to do the temple, we have to go to hire a monk, and do all kinds of stuff, burn incense and higher monk to preach and do everything the custom to follow the tradition. Back in Vietnam and China, whatever my parent do.

JC: What are some of the traditions that they will do at the ceremony besides burn incense?

SC: The clothes, like American tradition, for example, they go to the funeral and wear all black or they wear anything they want. We have to wear all the white to respect and we cannot just sit on the chair. We have to sit on the floor and bow and kneel and stuff.

JC: Does the bowing and kneeling, does this have any special significance?

SC: To respect the person who died, your elderly.

JC: So that's how you pay your respects?

SC: Yeah, to pay the respect.

JC: You talked about burning incense, what does that signify?

SC: Burning the incense to calling them to send them away to crossover to heaven.

JC: This is for funerals: you have anything special for cemetery visits?

SC: The cemetery visit is Easter, it's really big in Asian. Even back in Vietnam or China that tradition will not change. It doesn't matter where you go, in United States, China, Europe, it doesn't matter. That's really big in our culture, in Easter. Some custom, I still believe it but I don't do it much and another family did, like my uncle and aunt, they still did it. Every time they go to cemetery they really respect it. They bring the whole pig, they did the whole custom, they bring the whole pig, the chicken, the duck, and the fish, the crab. They do the whole thing like

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they did for the funeral. And they sit there, the whole family gathering, like the grandkids, everybody have to drop everything and go on the exactly day and to the cemetery and celebrate there and have a picnic. But me, I changing because I didn't go exactly day. I can either go whenever I was free, on the weekend free, but I still do it and I just tell them I do what I can. I don't follow the tradition.

JC: What exactly do you do then? I know you go on weekends, but what do you do at the cemetery?

SC: I still bring the food to do it, but I don't do, really, tradition like my uncle and aunt bring the pig and everything go picnic and gathering. The whole family have to be there, the grandkids and everybody, and have picnic there and eat.

JC: What do you do once you get to the cemetery? I know you said you don't bring all the food but what else do you do? Do you still burn the incense for them?

SC: I still burn the incense and bring the wine and the tea, and I still have to share the food with the family and burn the paper.

JC: What do you mean by "burning the paper?"

SC: I burning the paper, write down the name, I give them stuff. I tell them once a year, like, okay I bring you the wine and the clothes, the materials, the money and I respect and to give to the heaven for release.

JC: So burning the paper is giving them stuff?

SC: Yeah.

JC: What does the food signify?

SC: Just a celebration, a memory of them to celebrate the dead.

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JC: Okay, so it's just to celebrate them for the food. Besides cemetery visits and Chinese Easter, are there any other celebrations that you do?

SC: A wedding is a really, even we live in the States and do not change the tradition. It never been changed. We live here and even our kid, so when we marry and the parents, usually they like to go church, but we want to do stuff different from beside to go to the church or some people go temple, some people go church. We like to pick up the bride. Some Americans say when you marry here, you cannot see the bride until you go church or temple, but in our tradition the groom have to go to the bride house in the morning and give tea to the bride parent and to the older sibling, uncle, and aunt, and then they give the money for blessing and everything before they pick up the bride and then they go to the church together. That's our tradition.

JC: Is there any sort of name for that? Is it just something you do?

SC: I don't know what they call that, just a respect.

JC: Just to pay the respects? Like welcoming into the family?

SC: Yeah, welcome to the family and respect to the girl. I just want for blessing. I give the hand for your daughter blessing before our wedding. For the blessing.

JC: I know that there's a Chinese – Vietnamese New Year that follows the lunar calendar. Can you tell me about any celebrations that follow that?

SC: Chinese New Year is really big for us. We believe in here because every working and since everybody come to U.S., everybody celebrate because Christmas, New Year, and American New Year, and Chinese people work and they don't have too many holidays for them anymore. Back in Vietnam, people have a whole month because Asian New Year is a really big thing. Even now, China in the factory and Vietnam, they close for a whole month to celebrate. But since they come to the United States so people only have one day off or so and so. So, Chinese New Year

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and the Lunar New Year always in February and they have a big one in Houston every year, it been the last ten years, and they have it on, I think, Reliant Park for the last time. They have the Chinese culture and together they have lion dance. They have all kinds of Chinese food, Asian food tasting and they have Miss Chinatown there and they have all kinds of stuff and they celebrate and they writing, they selling Chinese tree and they have money tree and they have all our fortune and you go there and celebrate and different and all the restaurant, all the grocery store and they all have lion dance and bring them luck to the restaurant and they always bring the green carpet, the holding the green cabbage. So, the lion dance will get the green cabbage, call it “laisee,” and the red cracker, it have money in it. That’s the grand opening every year for it to open the year to bring luck to the restaurant, if they have a restaurant, to bring luck to the restaurant. If they open a restaurant, bring luck to the restaurant at the beginning of the year. But in the family, every family, they “traditioning,” so they have the New Year’s. They have that week before the New Year’s, they want the family go home, the kid, the children and everything. They got a new haircut, buy some new clothes, and wear they new clothes, and clean up the floor and wipe the house and some Asian, even write some letter, the good luck letter, like “Happy New Year” and “I wish you luck” and stuff like that. Put it in the wall and stuff like that. They put some new red lantern up and they even using laisee and put underneath the kid pillow and they cook a big feast that night and the family gathering and they want the kids to take a day off on the New Year Day and everybody just sit there and eat and they have a special they have lotus. They make a special sweet, they have, like, a rice ball with a peanut in there with ginger. And they have to eat noodle, long life to live and stuff like that. I know a lot of my friend, family still do it when my mom still live and she usually do it. Since I grow up here and I don’t do that anymore.

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JC: Would you say that the American culture has influenced how your family practices these celebrations?

SC: Mhm.

JC: Have you seen the American culture influence your family in any other way besides the Chinese cultures?

SC: Yeah, they influence me a lot because I thought Chinese culture is too much trouble. It's so many things to do, so many things to follow. So, I just ignore most of them.

JC: What are some of the things you would have to follow? What were those Chinese customs?

SC: For example, funeral, it's not like I'm not respect, but I think we go to the temple to burying, stuff like that, but I think you wear the costume and bow, knee, and you have to stay in the funeral home for seven day without sleep and I think that's too much for me. So, we just changing to two days and after the burying we don't do that anymore for seven days, stay in the funeral home for seven days without sleep and just look at the coffin, so I changing that.

JC: Have you been back to Vietnam since you've lived here?

SC: Yeah, I been back in Vietnam with my dad and one of my younger sibling in 2008 or 2009, I don't remember what year, but I did.

JC: How has the Vietnamese culture changed there since you left during the wartime?

SC: They changing a lot since I left because when I go back to Vietnam, and I went to the countryside. So, the countryside still look the same. There wasn't changing much, but in Saigon, it's more Americanized now, because went back there, a lot of Europeans and American go back there, so they changing a lot. They have McDonald's and high-end hotels and they have McDonald's and Burger King there. I taste some of the food in the countryside, it's authentic, I

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didn't like it much, but in the city, in Saigon, it's more like in the states. They changing the flavor because the Europeans for more Americanized.

JC: Would you say that the Vietnamese culture in Vietnam is still developing?

SC: More developing? Yes. They change, they changing.

JC: It's changed because of the American culture?

SC: Yes.

JC: Earlier you said that the Vietnamese cuisine down on Milam was pretty similar to actual Vietnam food in Vietnam. How would you say that the development of the Vietnamese culture of Houston, how's it changed relative to that in Vietnam?

SC: How it change?

JC: Do you think they're evolving similarly because of the American influence or do you think that Vietnam's culture is still very different and not as influenced?

SC: See, when I go back to Vietnam and I eat some food here and when I were back in the countryside, I didn't like the food there, but when I go to the city and it tastes similar to the one in Houston because they influence back because they Americanized. They more Americanized now, they cook, they different. So, in the Milam, it more authentic, but when you go to Bellaire, it kind of more like Americanized. More American tasted, because more American now, they like Vietnamese food.

JC: Did you happen to notice any customs that were in Vietnam that were still there from when you left it? Like, any cultural customs besides food.

SC: A lot of people still don't change the customs, the way they family. They don't change much. The way they dress, they eat, the food, they sleep, the way they talk, and they education. So, it don't change much. It's the same.

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JC: What was different about how they dress, how did they dress that was different?

SC: How do I say that? When you in U.S., right, you go sleep, you wear pajama. You go out, you changing your clothes, nice clothes you go out. But in Vietnam, you wear pajama you go sleep, when you go out you wear the same clothes, you go out, you don't change. But now in Saigon, they change, they're more Americanized now because more European go there so that's why they changing. But now what I see in Houston, some part the Asian culture, they still not changing. They look like Vietnam. If you go to Hong Kong city mall, you can tell the difference, people still not changing. They think they still in Saigon and Vietnam. Some part in Houston still do. Also, some part in Allen Parkway that the Asian leaving Allen Parkway. They still think they in Vietnam. They wasn't changed, they culture not changing at all.

JC: Okay, so you're saying that there are parts of the Vietnamese – Chinese community here that are just like Vietnam?

SC: Yes. They didn't change. They the same. If you go into Allen Parkway, when I go into Allen Parkway, I saw some people there, when I go back to Vietnam in 2008/9, they look just like them. They didn't change much. But some of them, they change completely different, Americanized. You know what I meant? See, the personality, some of them, they come, they live here forever, they thinking about, "Okay, I don't need to learn the language, English, at all. Because I living here, I live in Allen Parkway, Allen Parkway the area I live, all the Vietnamese, I live in the culture so I eat the Vietnamese food and all the people live there are Vietnamese. So I don't need to change anything at all, I just stay the same." But Houston been changing a lot. Houston been changing since I been here, the last 34 years. It been changing a lot. You see, it different place from the League City. I haven't been to League City for a while, but I know League City been changing a lot.

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JC: How do you mean it's changed a lot? How has it changed?

SC: People been moving out.

JC: What people have moved out?

SC: Like they upgrade. They fishing boat, they move out to- before they were there, now they move out to New Orleans. They not a fisherman anymore, they open their grocery store and before they just fisherman, now they open the restaurant, they buy and sell fish to somebody else. So they open their own restaurant to do seafood restaurant, stuff like that. And then, in Fuqua area, they live in different part and Texas City, Bay Area, Fuqua area, Allen Parkway, Milam, and they move out from Chinatown, downtown and they move to Houston area.

JC: So, you're saying that the community is expanding, so that's how it's changed?

SC: Yes, expanding.

JC: So, it's just getting bigger?

SC: Yeah, bigger and bigger. And all the kids in the second generation, they don't want to be fisherman anymore, they don't want anything and they got higher education some of them go to college. The kids, they don't want to follow the kid's footsteps and they be higher education and they be better and better and better in Houston.

JC: How have you stayed active in this growing Vietnamese – Chinese community? How do you keep up with it?

SC: A lot of people just- It just different, you live here and you grow up and you know, and a lot of parent now, because the second generation, a lot of mom and they want a better life for their kid because they grow up here, so they volunteer. They volunteer and they teaching they kid better life and kids stay in school, so things are different.

JC: Do you have anything else you would like to add? Vietnam War or the Vietnamese – Chinese community here that's evolved since you've arrived.

SC: Since I been here, I think it's changing my life. It completely different when I was living from here in Vietnam when I would leave and when I go back to Vietnam, I see how difficulty when I would leave and I go back and my life here. It was so good and when I go back there and I see how it difficulty with them. So, when I come back and I told my kid if you want to live a better life so you always have to stay in school and get a good education and treat yourself nicely and treat people nicely. Always be nice, that's why Asian culture people and I think Asian people here, and all, we have good influence for people in the States because people looking at them. Why Asian, they were so smart, actually they Asian is not smart like people think they are because they try really hard. People always think they smart, but they not because they try really hard and they parent push them really hard and to try where they are and to be where they are and be good and stay in school and keep out of trouble.

JC: Do you think that's something that comes directly from the Vietnamese – Chinese culture back in Vietnam or is it something that's evolved because you moved here and you saw how America has that freedom to do that?

SC: Because the parent come back here because they don't want to live a difficulty life. When they saw, when they first come here, the parent, the first-generation, they didn't speak any English, they have either work in the restaurant, dish washer, or they doing the sewing factory, or they doing the fisherman, so they don't want the kid to grow up to be like that. So, they try to influence to told their kid "You want to live a better life, you better stay in the school to study hard." So, that's why the parents influence to tell the kid "You don't want to be like me to work

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in the factory for the rest of your life or work in the restaurant to wash dishes or doing the fisherman. So, you want to have a better life, you have to stay in school and study good."

JC: Do you happen to have any photos that I could use for part of this project?

SC: Yeah, a few.

JC: Okay, thank you for your time. I'll get to your photos and thank you for letting me interview you.

SC: Thank you.

End of Interview

