

Encounters with Technology:
At Home, at Work (or School), and at Play

Interviews with Six Southeast Asian Immigrants
about Their Daily Encounters with Technology
in Southeast Asia and in the United States of America

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Oral History Materials and Methods
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Index of Interviewees

1. Son Thanh Huynh: Son, a fifteen-year-old Vietnamese, emigrated to the United States in 1988. He resides in Bowling Green, Kentucky with his father, where he attends classes at Bowling Green Junior High School and The Refugee Assistance Center.
2. Samuth Deputy Koam: Samuth, a twenty-five-year-old Cambodian, emigrated to the United States in 1979. He resides in Bowling Green, Kentucky near his adoptive parents, Dr. and Mrs. Kenneth Deputy. He graduated from Western Kentucky University in 1988 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Industrial Arts. He is employed as a translator and counselor for the Barren River Health Department and as a translator for the Kentucky State Police driver's training program. A participant in the People In Law School program, he also provides other immigrants with legal counseling. Having been involved with the Reserve Officers' Training Corps during his college career, Samuth now intends to enlist in the United States Army as an officer trainee.
3. Dung Hung Pham: Dung, a nineteen-year-old Vietnamese, emigrated to the United States in 1988. He resides in Bowling Green, Kentucky with his brother, Viet, where he attends classes at Bowling Green High School and The Refugee Assistance Center.
4. Viet T. Pham: Viet, a twenty-five-year-old Vietnamese, emigrated to the United States in 1988. He resides in Bowling Green, Kentucky with his brother, Dung, where he is employed at The Director's Chair and where he attends classes at The Refugee Assistance Center. He hopes to attend Western Kentucky University after earning his G.E.D.
5. Thim Prak: Thim, an eighteen-year-old Cambodian, emigrated to the United States from Thailand in 1986. She resides in Bowling Green, Kentucky with her mother and father, where she attends classes at Bowling Green High School and the Refugee Assistance Center.
6. Pane Sananikone: Pane, a fifty-year-old Laotian, emigrated to the United States in 1986. He resides in Bowling Green, Kentucky with his wife and children, where he is employed at The Director's Chair and where he attends classes at The Refugee Assistance Center.

From the instant we are awakened each morning by the persistent buzz of our electric, digital clock-radio alarms to the moment each evening when our fingers lightly brush our touch lamps to dim the lights on our sleepy eyes, we Americans daily encounter technology so sophisticated that its mechanics often defy our most earnest understanding and, yet, so easily accessible that we are often completely unaware of how it permeates the entirety of our existence. My oral history project, in which six Southeast Asian immigrants living in Bowling Green, Kentucky were queried about their encounters with technology in Southeast Asia and in America, illustrates, in part, the experiences of one modern, immigrant folk group as it attempts to become acculturated into American ways of life, particularly with respect to technology and daily living. Whether at home, or at work (or at school), or at play, technology remains an integral and inescapable part of American experience, so intricately and inextricably woven into the fabric of American life that the thread may seem invisible to those who have never known another manner of living. For those persons who have known other folkways less attuned to the technological trappings of American life, acculturation often proves an awesome, sometimes awkward, endeavor with an unexpected effort around every experiential avenue. The cassette-recorded comments that comprise the basis for

the text of this paper were conducted from March 18, 1989 through March 30, 1989 at The Refugee Assistance Center, 603 East Eleventh Street, Bowling Green, Kentucky.

Son Thanh Huynh

In Vietnam

Son lived with his family in a one-room residence. The house was not electrified, and oil lamps and candles were used for illumination. Due to the mild climate, no artificial heating or cooling system was needed to condition the home. The kitchen was equipped with a wood-burning cooking stove, and drinking water was taken from the river. Brooms were used to sweep the residence clean, and laundry was washed by hand in the river, where bathing occurred, also. A privy was located behind the residence. While buses were available for long-distance travel, walking was the most common mode of transportation. Telephones were not readily accessible for use, and written letters served for long-distance communication. Most often, Son discerned the time of day by simply looking at the sun.¹

Son attended a Communist-controlled school. Subjects studied included history, science, and mathematics.²

Son's family did not own a radio or a television. He doesn't recall any particular activity in which his family engaged during leisure hours, although he remembers playing soccer at school.³

In America

Son lives with his father in an apartment. While Son remembers once receiving an accidental electric shock from an electrical outlet, his father remains responsible for changing light bulbs and fuses. (Major home repairs are handled by the landlord of the apartment.) From experience, Son has taught himself to control the heating system at home. By watching others, Son has learned how to cook in his American kitchen, and the first meal he prepared was soup. Because his father is partially handicapped, Son has taken responsibility for many housekeeping tasks; he and his father own an electric vacuum cleaner, which Son finds easy to operate. On Saturday or Sunday, Son washes laundry at a nearby laundromat, where he taught himself to use the washers and dryers. Son enjoys the convenience of an indoor bathroom. Son's father owns an automobile. Although they do not have a telephone in their home, Son can easily use one. Although he owns a wristwatch and there are clocks at home, Son still often discerns the time of day by looking at the sun.⁴

Son enjoys playing sports, including soccer, basketball, volleyball, and table tennis. Since he and his father do not own a television, he watches television at a neighbor's home. Son has no one favorite television program, but he especially enjoys comedy programs. Son likes to listen to the radio, particularly news broadcasts which include information about

events in Vietnam. Although he is not particularly interested in the popular music he hears on the radio, Son is currently taking piano lessons, an activity, he admits, he could have never enjoyed in Vietnam. On occasion, Son attends movies at local theatres, and his favorite recent film was Rambo, a film concerning the rescue of American prisoners-of-war in Vietnam. Son also enjoys conversation with friends during his leisure hours.⁵

Son attends classes at Bowling Green Junior High School and at The Refugee Assistance Center. He attends a computer class one evening each week at Bowling Green High School, and he hopes to have a computer at home, something, he admits, for which he could not have hoped in Vietnam.⁶

Of all the modern conveniences he has encountered in the United States, Son views the automobile as the most valuable. The modern convenience he would most like to own is a television. The one aspect of life in Vietnam that Son misses the most is the abundance of food. The one aspect of life in America that he enjoys the most is personal liberty.⁷

Samuth Deputy Koam

In Cambodia

Samuth lived with his family in a seven-room residence constructed of wood, with a clay tile roof, and built on stilts. The house was not electrified, and oil lamps and home-fashioned candles made of fish oil were used for illumination. Due to the mild climate, no artificial heating

or cooling system was needed to condition the home. The kitchen was equipped with a wood-burning cooking stove, and drinking water, always first boiled, was taken from a well and from large containers in which rain water was collected. Without refrigeration, meat and fish were preserved by drying and by salting, and perishable foods were eaten the day they were purchased. Brooms were used to sweep the residence clean, and everyone took great pride in keeping home and yard neat and clean. Laundry was washed outside in pans and hung in the sun to dry. A privy was located behind the residence, where a container of water was stored for bathing. (People often bathed in the river, too.) In addition to walking, bicycles and motorcycles were the most common modes of transportation. Samuth's family had no telephone in their home, and written letters and messages relayed from one individual to another served for long-distance communication. Samuth's home had a spring-powered clock by which to discern the time of day.⁸

Samuth remembers the schedules of elementary school and high school very vividly. Elementary school met from 7:00 a.m. until 11:30 a.m. and from 2:30 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. High school met from 6:00 a.m. until 11:00 a.m. and from 2:00 p.m. until 4:30 p.m. During the mid-day interim, students walked or bicycled home for a noon meal. Most of the school day was spent in serious textbook study, but Samuth does recall that on occasion the principal would allow the students to spend the entire afternoon in play.⁹

During leisure time, Samuth recalls that people would lie down on tables in their yards, drink tea, smoke cigarettes, and converse with their families and neighbors about the day's activities. Battery-powered radios would be brought outside to listen to news broadcast⁵. Children would often play in the area underneath the house.¹⁰

In America

When he first arrived in America, Samuth did not speak English at all, and he spent a great deal of time alone in his room. At that time, he lived in the home of his adoptive parents, Dr. and Mrs. Kenneth Deputy. At first, he was frightened of any appliance, such as a cooking stove or a lawnmower, that had the potential to explode or begin a blaze. Also, not knowing how to control the shower in the bathroom, he once doused himself in icy water. Samuth now lives alone in his own apartment. He cooks for himself, with considered care, and he can also operate a microwave oven, although he doesn't own one himself. Samuth washes his laundry at a local laundromat; his mother taught him how to operate the washers and dryers. Any home repairs other than very minor ones, Samuth allows the landlord of the apartment to manage.¹¹

Samuth attended Bowling Green High School when he first arrived in Bowling Green. In the beginning, he worked so tirelessly at academics that he refused to eat or sleep, and he became ill enough to require hospitalization. Once,

unknowingly, he entered the women's restroom instead of the men's restroom, because he could not read the signs on the doors at school.¹²

While in high school, Samuth worked part-time at The Refugee Assistance Center, the Animal Hospital, and McDonald's restaurant, where, in particular, his unfamiliarity with the English language provided for some humorous moments of miscommunication. Samuth enrolled at Western Kentucky University as a pre-law student in 1981, but he felt his grasp of the English language was not sturdy enough for that discipline of study. While pursuing his undergraduate degree in Industrial Arts, Samuth had the opportunity to become very knowledgeable of computer programming and operations.¹³

With his busy work schedule, Samuth has very little leisure time. He prefers to spend non-working hours helping people who need his assistance in one way or another. If he has any solitary leisure time, he likes to read books that further his knowledge, understanding, and self-improvement.¹⁴

Of all the modern conveniences he has encountered in the United States, Samuth considers the telephone as the most valuable, because he enjoys communicating with others and because the telephone has helped him to learn the language. After the telephone, he believes the automobile is the next most valuable modern convenience, because it allows people to travel from one place to another quickly. The

modern convenience he finds the least useful includes any appliance that could overheat, explode, or erupt in fire. The modern convenience he would most like to own is a computer, to aid in learning. The one aspect of life in Cambodia that Samuth misses most is the friendliness of the people in his native land. The one aspect of life in America that he enjoys the most is freedom.¹⁵

Thim Prak

In Thailand

Thim lived with her family in a two-room residence constructed of wood. The house was not electrified, and candles were used for illumination. Due to the mild climate, no artificial heating or cooling system was needed to condition the home. According to Thim, if one were too cool inside the house, he or she simply dressed in more warm clothing; if one were too warm inside the house, he or she simply went outside. The kitchen was equipped with a table-top cooking surface that burned wood or charcoal. Thim's family shopped for perishable foods daily, and they did not save food from day to day. The floor of the house was dirt, which was swept with a broom, sometimes homemade by Thim's father and sometimes purchased from a store. Laundry was washed by hand in large tubs outside the house, where bathing also occurred, using water stored in large containers at the home. A privy was located near the residence. Bicycles

were the most common mode of transportation. Telephones were not readily accessible for use, and friends were visited on holidays and on Saturday and Sunday. The time of day was discerned most often by watching the movements of people outside.¹⁶

Thim recalls school in Thailand as being somewhat similar to school in America, but the subjects studied in Thailand were different from the subjects studied in the United States.¹⁷

Thim's family did not own a television, but they did own a battery-powered radio on which they listened to news broadcasts and to music. Thim remembers family and group conversation as a large leisure activity, and children often occupied themselves by playing games of their own imagination.¹⁸

In America

Thim lives with her family in a house. Friends helped her learn how to use many of the modern appliances in her home, such as the cooking stove. Although Thim's family does not own a microwave oven, she does know how to operate one and would like to purchase one someday. Although she doesn't normally operate the heating system at home, she does know how to control it. Thim's mother taught her how to use the electric vacuum cleaner. Thim's family purchased an electric washer and dryer, but her mother is responsible

for laundry tasks, although Thim can operate those appliances, too. Thim enjoys using personal hygiene appliances, such as her electric blow dryer and her electric curling iron. Although Thim's family doesn't have a telephone in their home, she can easily use one. Thim depends on her mother to awaken her in the morning, rather than an alarm clock.¹⁹

Thim's family owns a television and a video cassette recorder. She enjoys watching movies, particularly those depicting martial artists, and cartoons, especially "Richie Rich." Thim enjoys watching M.T.V. (music television), and at home after school she listens to popular music on the radio, too. Thim's mother does not yet allow her to date, although she is allowed to go shopping at Greenwood Mall or to go skating with an older chaperone.²⁰

Thim attends classes at Bowling Green High School and at the Refugee Assistance Center. She also attends a computer class one evening each week at Bowling Green High School. Thim will be moving to Massachusetts to live with an aunt and uncle and work with her aunt in a factory that manufactures Halloween costumes.²¹

Of all the modern conveniences she has encountered in the United States, Thim would most like to own a typewriter, so that she could type letters to her family in Cambodia and letters to prospective employers.²²

Dung Pham

In Vietnam

Dung lived with his family in a four-room residence. The house was electrified, and electric lights were used for illumination. Due to the mild climate, there was no need for an artificial heating or cooling system, although Dung's family did use electric fans to cool the house on occasion. The kitchen was equipped with a coal-burning stove, and Dung's family did not own a refrigerator; perishable foods were purchased and consumed on a daily basis. Brooms were used to sweep the residence clean, and laundry was washed by hand and hung in the sun to dry. Water for laundry and bathing was taken from a well near the house and other large containers of water stored at the residence. Dung's home was equipped with an indoor bathroom, but unlike American bathrooms, it did not feature a commode or a bathtub. Dung's family traveled by walking, by bicycle, by motorcycle, and by bus. Since they did not have a telephone at home, Dung's family communicated by written letter over long distances. Dung could discern the time of day from spring-powered clocks at home or by using his own wristwatch.²³

Dung walked to school in Vietnam. At school he studied science, mathematics, and social studies. The school was not equipped with computers.²⁴

Dung watched television in Vietnam, but the shows were not American programs. His family owned a radio. Dung remembers enjoying fishing and swimming in his leisure time.²⁵

In America

Dung lives with his brother in a one-bedroom apartment. Dung learned much about American ways of living by reading books about the United States when he was awaiting emigration in the Philippines. Friends taught him how to use the heating system at home, which he considers easy to operate. Dung knows how to cook in a microwave oven, although he doesn't personally own one. Since the floors of his apartment are not carpeted, Dung has no need for an electric vacuum cleaner; he uses a broom and a mop to clean the floors. Dung washes his laundry at a nearby laundromat, where he learned to use the washers and dryers by simply reading the directions. Dung prefers the convenience of indoor plumbing, which he also learned about in his lessons on America in the Philippines. If home repairs are needed at his apartment, Dung contacts the landlord. Dung enjoys using his electric blow dryer, which he also used in Vietnam. Dung doesn't own his own automobile, although he would someday like to, and friends drive him wherever he needs to go. His friends will also teach him to drive when that time comes.²⁶

Dung attends classes at Bowling Green High School and at the Refugee Assistance Center. He has not yet learned to use a computer. Dung would like to attend college.²⁷

After school, Dung likes to go out with his friends. Often they bowl at Western Kentucky University or play video games at Greenwood Mall. Dung enjoys watching television,

particularly wrestling and adventure movies. When he is out in an automobile, he listens to the radio, and he enjoys American popular music.²⁸

Of all the modern conveniences he has encountered in the United States, Dung views the telephone and the automobile as the most valuable. The modern convenience he would most like to own is an automobile. The one aspect of life in Vietnam that Dung misses most is his family's home. The one aspect of life in the United States that he appreciates most is educational opportunity.²⁹

Viet T. Pham

In Vietnam

Viet lived with his family in a six-room residence. The house was not electrified, and oil lamps and candles were used for illumination. Due to the mild climate, no artificial heating or cooling system was needed to condition the home; if, on occasion, the house became too warm to tolerate, one went swimming or used a hand fan to cool the heat. The kitchen was equipped with a wood-burning cooking stove, and perishable foods were not kept from day to day. Brooms and mops were used to clean the floors. Water was carried from the river; rain water was collected in containers and in the well for washing laundry, which was done by hand outside, and bathing, which was done in, or near, the privy, outside the residence. Long distances were

traversed by bus or motorcycle, and short distances were traveled by bicycle. Viet's family had no telephone at home, and written letters served for long-distance communication. Viet's home had spring-powered clocks by which to discern the time of day, and the bell-tower of a nearby Catholic church tolled certain hours of the day, also.³⁰

Viet remembers school in Vietnam as being like school in the United States.³¹

During leisure hours, Viet recalls playing football, swimming, fishing, and storytelling. Viet's family owned an old radio, but they did not own a television; Viet remembers watching American western programs on a neighbor's television.³²

In America

Viet lives with his brother in a one-bedroom apartment. The landlord taught him how to use the heating and cooling system in his home, and a friend taught him how to use an electric fan. The landlord and friends showed him how to operate the kitchen appliances in his home, and both he and his brother prepare meals. Viet manages minor electrical maintenance, like changing fuses, by himself. Since his apartment is not carpeted, he doesn't own an electric vacuum cleaner. Viet washes his own laundry at a nearby laundromat. He enjoys using such personal care appliances as his electric blow dryer. Although Viet has earned his temporary driving permit, he does not yet own a car;

friends drive him wherever he needs to go. Although he has learned to use the telephone by watching others, Viet has no telephone at home; he is saving as much money as he can to purchase an automobile. Viet owns an alarm clock, which he learned to use by reading the instructions, but he awakens early each morning without the benefit of the alarm.³³

Viet attends classes at The Refugee Assistance Center, and he hopes to earn his G.E.D. He also attends a computer class at Bowling Green High School one evening each week.³⁴

Viet is employed at The Director's Chair, where he paints and assembles tables and chairs. In the beginning, his supervisor taught him how to complete his work, and he also learned by watching other workers perform their duties.³⁵

In his spare time, Viet enjoys reading and watching movies on television. He enjoys listening to news broadcasts on the radio; although at first he couldn't understand the lyrics of the popular songs he heard on the radio, he now likes the music, too. Viet plays ping-pong with friends at Western Kentucky University. He occasionally attends a movie at one of the local theatres, and he particularly remembers enjoying the film Rambo. Viet also likes the simple pastime of conversation with friends.³⁶

Of all the modern conveniences he has encountered in the United States, Viet has the least use for the telephone. The modern convenience he would most like to own is an

automobile. The one aspect of life in Vietnam that Viet misses the most is school, his teachers and his friends. The one aspect of life in the United States that he appreciates the most is educational opportunity.³⁷

Pane Sananikone

In Laos

Pane lived with his family in a five-room residence constructed of wood. Although Pane's home was equipped with electricity, he often used oil lamps for illumination, due to the high cost of utilities. Due to the mild climate and the extreme expense of utilities, no artificial heating or cooling system was used to condition the home, other than small, electric fans. Pane's kitchen was equipped with a wood-burning cooking stove and a kerosene and electric refrigerator. He also used an electric hot plate on which to brew coffee. Food was primarily purchased and prepared in amounts that could be consumed in one day. Brooms were used to sweep the floors, and rags were used to mop them. Water was taken from a well for laundry, which was washed outside by hand in large pans and hung in the sun to dry. Well water was used for bathing, and baths were taken from large pans of water, also. While telephones were available for use, they were reserved for emergency situations; when Pane was away from home on military duty, he communicated

with his family by letter. Pane traveled long distances by military plane or military car. Since he did not own his own automobile, he often traveled by bus, motorcycle, and bicycle.³⁸

Pane attended school for ten years in Laos, but he did not complete his final year and did not graduate. Pane was imprisoned by the Communists in Laos for nine and one-half years, beginning in 1975. He had begun to learn English before his imprisonment, but he was unable to continue his study until coming to the United States three years ago. (Pane is now studying to earn his G.E.D.)³⁹

After graduating from military intelligence school in Japan, Pane served in the Laotian military for eighteen years, where he worked as a clerk in an office at military headquarters.⁴⁰

Pane owned a radio, but he did not have a television at home. On occasion, he would watch television at his cousin's home. Pane most enjoyed spending his leisure time working in his vegetable garden, which he cultivated all year around, and hunting and fishing. When Pane was forced to spend his leisure time indoors, such as when he was away from home on military duty, he would play cards and other games with his companions, but he did not gamble money.⁴¹

In America

Pane lives with his family in a house. Pane's brother, who emigrated to America before Pane, taught him how to use

many of the appliances, such as the heating and cooling system and the kitchen appliances, in his American home. While at first Pane found American kitchen appliances troublesome, he often prepares food in his kitchen at home. Pane purchased an electric vacuum cleaner for sweeping the carpets in his home. In the beginning, Pane and his family washed their laundry at a laundromat, but since then he has purchased an electric washer and dryer for their home. Pane's brother also taught him how to drive a car in the United States, and he gave Pane an automobile. When the car his brother gave him would no longer run, Pane purchased a new automobile for his family. With the help of his seventeen-year-old son, Pane attempts to manage most basic home repairs; when their expertise is not sufficient to make the repairs, they locate someone with the knowledge to better accomplish the job.⁴²

Pane is employed as a furniture painter at The Director's Chair. He received on-the-job training from his American supervisors. While Pane applies paint to the furniture with both a brush and a spray can, most of the furniture is dipped into large containers of paint or varnish.⁴³

In his leisure time, Pane enjoys reading Reader's Digest and watching wrestling, boxing, and basketball on television. (He also likes to watch football on television, but he doesn't understand the rules of the game.) Pane likes to listen to news broadcasts on the radio, although he does not

care for music, American or Laotian. Each year in the spring and summer, Pane cultivates a vegetable garden. He also enjoys hunting and fishing.⁴⁴

Of all the modern conveniences he has encountered in the United States, Pane has the least use for the telephone. The one aspect of life in Laos that Pane misses most is the sense of self-sufficiency he earned by providing for his family without having to purchase with money every item they needed to live. The one aspect of life in America that Pane enjoys the most is the wealth of educational opportunities.⁴⁵

"Man is still the most extraordinary computer of all," remarked John F. Kennedy over one-quarter of a century ago.⁴⁶ The experiences of the six Southeast Asian immigrants interviewed for this paper as they encounter an unfamiliar culture inundated with technology, not entirely foreign to them but certainly more pervasive than in their native cultures, proves the veracity of his statement, yet. Often, when people are forced into life situations frighteningly foreign to them, they become close-minded and unreceptive to new life experiences. Conversely, the six individuals interviewed for this paper selectively embrace American technology, in its multitudinous forms, choosing those facets which can ease their existence and enrich their lives,

particularly with respect to their pursuit of liberty and their pursuit of education, endeavors so closely akin in their collective cultural philosophy of life. Amidst the awful upheaval in their lives, some folkways of their native lands may have been retained intact, and some may have been retained with changes; without any doubt, new folkways, in response to the American experience in general and the American technological experience in particular, are being forged each moment of the day. A modern maxim advises us: "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." Under the constrictive constraints of a Communist regime in their respective homelands, the Southeast Asian immigrants interviewed for this paper certainly tasted a bitter fruit. Here in America, perhaps, with the aid of some technological sugar, they can enjoy a sweeter nectar.

Endnotes

¹Interview with Son Thanh Huynh, Bowling Green, Kentucky, 25 March 1989.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Interview with Samuth Deputy Koam, Bowling Green, Kentucky, 20 March 1989.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Interview with Thim Prak, Bowling Green, Kentucky, 23 March 1989.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Interview with Dung Pham, Bowling Green, Kentucky, 30 March 1989.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Interview with Viet T. Pham, Bowling Green, Kentucky,
23 March 1989.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Interview with Pane Sananikone, Bowling Green, Kentucky,
18 March 1989.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Rhoda Thomas Tripp, compiler, The International
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1970), p. 630.

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