

Through Women's Eyes

Southeast Asian American Women's Experiences

an oral history and
photographic documentary
by Lisa Falk and
Uaporn Ang Robinson



Rady Tes and mother (Cambodian)

This presentation focuses on a documentary oral history and photography project about Southeast Asian American women. It provides an overview of the project and shares some of the photographs and women's words.

From 1990-1992, Ang Robinson and Lisa Falk conducted a still photography and oral history documentary project about women from the Cambodian, Lao, Thai and Vietnamese communities in the Washington DC metropolitan area. They interviewed women about their lives, in particular about their dual identities as Southeast Asians and Americans and their multiple roles as professionals, wives, mothers, tradition bearers and community leaders. To complement these women's words, Falk shot photographic portraits and images of community events.

The project began with the creation of an advisory committee of community representatives and humanities specialists to help formulate goals and objectives and to help identify women to interview. Eighteen women, at least 4 from each of the four communities, were interviewed and photographed. Women who were successfully balancing their multiple roles and identities and who could serve as positive role models for the younger generation of Southeast Asian Americans were chosen to be interviewed. These women are doers and through their work they reach out to others beyond their own community.

“The American community has a lot of communities making America. And even though we’re new, we are a part of the American community. America, as a whole, each community should know the other community, should know who else is around you, in order to work together.”

-- Phouratsmy Naughton

The following words and images introduce the women who generously shared their stories with us. We hope this project aides them in their ambassadorial roles, and that their words will be an inspiration to you.



Phouratsamy (Phou) Naughton (Lao)
Buddhist Nun/Radio Broadcaster, Voice of America

Phuratsamy (Phou) Naughton (Lao)
radio broadcaster, Voice of America



Phouratsmy Naughton, called Phou, originally came from Laos to the United States as a student. When she returned to Laos in 1960 she began working for the US Information Services. Two years later, when the Voice of America began broadcasting to Laos, she applied for a job and was hired to work in the Washington office. Phou said, “The reason I got married is that the Lao family doesn’t let the young girl go away without getting married. The marriage came after I applied for a job at VOA. It was an arranged marriage.”

Three years later she returned to Laos with her husband and two children. Again she worked for USIS. In 1968 her husband was reported missing in action by the Lao government. A couple years later she remarried, this time to an American, and returned to live in the US, where she again worked for the Voice of America until 1991.



Phou was instrumental in establishing the Lao Buddhist temple, Wat Lao Buddhavong, in Manassas, Virginia. It was through her efforts that the monks were able to leave the Thai refugee camp and resettle here. She herself became a Buddhist nun.

Lao New Year
Arlington and Manassas, VA

This photograph shows Phou during the Lao new year celebration. She faces where the monks sit as she explains to the assembly the ceremonial steps for blessing the new year.



The photo on the left shows a money tree. They were raising funds to build a large temple that is now thriving in Manassas, VA. The right-hand photo shows food to be blessed by the monks, served to the monks and then the congregation.





At the temple, Phou works with the youth to teach them about their Lao heritage, including traditional dances. In the photograph on the left Kathy Prasith (Lao) is performing at the New Year's celebration and on the right she is at home in the bedroom she shares with her older sister.



“I remind the children that we should be a healthy community, a good citizen of community. In order to build our community, we have to come together and learn a lot of things, and we have to be good....Having identity is important. Our culture is something we have to keep.”

--Phouratsmy Naughton





Nguyen Nguyet Anh (Vietnamese), publisher Pho'nho, a mid-Atlantic regional Vietnamese newspaper

Nguyen Anh is the publisher and owner of a weekly Vietnamese newspaper called *Pho Nho*, which she started in 1987 as a means to pay for her daughter's college education. Here she is in her office near Seven Corners in Northern Virginia. Anh escaped with her family from Vietnam by boat the day the country was taken over by the communist regime.

Anh told us *"The week I escaped the country on the boat I decided that what I can do for my country, my people, and for the revolution, I will do. I will serve it. I'm talented with music, and I decided to use my knowledge and my talent. I decided that I can write my own songs to console people or to ask the Vietnamese people to raise up, stand up, don't cry all the time, and get up and back in the revolution, and we are going to fight until the last day of the communists. They must be out of the country."* Since then Anh has written over 200 songs about Vietnam, revolution, and freedom. She has recorded her music and performs for refugee communities all over the world.

American culture has supported Anh in her commitment to being a revolutionary singer. It also gave her her life without her family losing face. She told us *“Before I left my country, I argued with my husband, and never thought of divorce. It’s very hard to have a divorce in my country. One day I got mad at my husband and I tried to commit suicide, because I couldn’t do anything. If I went back to my mother, my parents would lose face. So I committed suicide. I wanted to kill myself. But I didn’t die you know.”* In America divorce is accepted more and when her husband complained about her frequent trips to perform for refugees they were divorced.

When we asked Anh what was the most important thing about living in America for her, she answered *“Besides the freedom? Yes, freedom comes first. Then woman, being a woman is the thing I learned a lot from America, and I learned it and I appreciate it. A woman can go into the professional life and work and be successful. In America, I learned a lot and I got stronger spiritually.”*



Nguyen Nguyet Anh performing, VA



In 1971, Dr. Anchalee Muskabhumma (Thai) came to the United States from Thailand with her husband, both were medical students. Dr. Anchalee has her own practice as a pediatrician in an inner city neighborhood in Baltimore.

In Thailand, Dr. Anchalee studied dance until her medical studies became too demanding. In Order to pass on Thai cultural traditions to her three children, while they were growing up she taught dance at Wat Thai, the Thai temple, in Wheaton, Maryland. This photograph is of the Wat Thai dancers at the Loy Khathong celebration by the Reflecting Pool in Washington, DC, presented by the Thai American Association.



During Loy Khathong, a Hindu-influenced Buddhist ceremony, participants light khathongs in thanks to Mother River for her gift of water. Khathongs are traditionally made of banana leaves, lotus blossoms and incense. These images show the khathongs being lit and set adrift.



About her children having two identities, being Thai Americans, Dr. Anchalee said, *“I think for the younger generation, the two identities, this is a privilege of theirs. They’re lucky to have two identities. My daughter right now may not have much difficulty with two identities, but the other generation—the third generation, my grandchild—definitely will have difficulties, because the influence of the second identity will be more than the primary identity. They may have a hard time.*



“We try to keep those two identities as much as we can. But, you know, I can not work by myself. The identity has to be a community, also. If the community is effective and so influences the younger generation, they will keep it. So I cannot say that this will happen just from me alone. It is a big job. That’s why I try to get the community involved, to push them, to get the younger generation involved, also. If you don’t do it, who else is going to do it? That’s why I try to involve them with it.”



In 1979, Thida Khus (Cambodian) with her three children came to the United States as a refugee from Cambodia via Thailand. Her husband joined them a little later when he was offered a job with a firm in San Antonio, Texas. Although Thida had no schooling beyond the high school level, she found she had a talent for social work. In San Antonio, she worked for the United Catholic Conference as the outreach worker responsible for the Cambodian refugee community. In 1985, she helped establish the Khmer Cambodian Society of San Antonio, which helps Cambodian refugees with social and legal problems, and sponsors a cultural festival each year. She served as the Society's director until 1990. In 1989, she helped form the Cambodian Network Council, a national organization located in Washington, DC, which is devoted to strengthening Cambodian communities in the United States. Thida served as the organization's executive director for two years, after which she went to Cambodia for a year to consult on the repatriation situation.

In America Thida has seen the importance of women becoming involved in policy-making and politics. This is not a common role for women in Cambodia. She explained,

"If you look at all the levels, the people who are making the policies, making decisions, they are all men. But if you go see who are the ones who actually do the work, it's usually women. And this is the problem right there. The implementor and the one who make the policy don't talk. Then how are you going to make things work if these two don't cooperate and they don't listen to each other and don't get involved with one another?"

"Right now the big need in policy-making in organizations in the leadership roles. A woman has to step out and do it. It's okay to take credit for it. That's the most difficult thing that I've learned. First of all, since the beginning I don't want to take credit. I would be willing to do the things, but I don't want to take credit. Even now, I never look at myself as a leader. I always look at myself as somebody who does the thing that needs to be done and has to be done."



When we asked Thida to comment on her personal goals, her words reflected the sentiments we heard voiced by so many of the women we interviewed. She said, *“Being a woman I don’t have a personal goal. You do a lot of things that need to be done. It’s always doing, living for the community. I think right now my family has expanded, from just me, my children, and my husband to the Cambodian community in San Antonio, to the refugee community in San Antonio, and now it’s to the Cambodian-American community in the whole United States. That’s how I feel. Maybe it’s too big of a thing, but talking about the personal level, that’s how it is. And my personal goal, I’d like to help the community to be on their feet, to be able to take charge of their life.”*

“My personal goal is to see that happening, and then later on I can retire so I can go fishing with my husband. But even though fishing probably is the thing that I most enjoy doing, I can’t see living life doing something that has no meaning to somebody else.”



Bounsou Sananikone (Lao) left Laos as a refugee. She studied law in Vietnam and is an accomplished artist. In the US, she has devoted herself to helping members of the Lao community in Virginia. She does this through her work as an extension agent with Arlington County.





Anh Houg-Thi Tu (Vietnamese) is a lawyer in charge of a paralegal advocacy group called Volunteers for the Elderly. They make legal services accessible to low-income, older minorities. Anh primarily works with Vietnamese seniors.

When we interviewed Artree (Audrey) Panichakoon (Thai) she was beginning as a college student at the Pratt Institute of Art in Baltimore, MD. After graduating, she worked as the art director for *A Magazine* in New York City.





Toumkham Somphanh (Lao) and her husband were diplomats stationed in New York when Laos fell to the communists. Luckily they had some savings and were able to purchase a dry cleaning business in Virginia, which they operated with their children. Later they opened Kingdom Printing, a quick copy store, in Alexandria, VA.

Suwattana H.A. (Toi) came to this country to study at Marymount University in Northern Virginia. While in school she worked in a restaurant in Arlington, which she and her husband later bought. They changed into a Thai restaurant, the Star of Siam, making it one of the first in Virginia. They now own several in VA and DC.



Suwattana (Toi) H.A. (Thai)
owner, Star of Siam restaurants
Roslyn, VA/Washington, DC



Khúc Ming Tho (Vietnamese) directs the Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association, based in Fairfax County, VA. She represents the rights of political prisoners and their families in Vietnam, and appeals to the US government to intervene for these prisoners human rights. Her husband was still held in a re-education camp as a political prisoner when we interviewed her in 1991. She advocates for the prompt release of these prisoners and for their reunification with their families in the United States.

She stated, "I have learned to be appreciative of the freedoms offered in this country and the opportunities given to all people to make a difference in this world and impact positively on the lives of all people."



Lany Lang originally came to the United States as a student. Shortly afterwards, the communists took over Cambodia and she could not return home. In the Washington, DC area, she was the first Cambodian woman to work as a mental health clinical therapist. Increasingly she is being called on to work with Cambodians in other parts of the US and with Cambodian refugees in Southeast Asia.

Lany Tan Lang (Cambodian)
clinical therapist/artist
Maryland



Lany reflected on her life in her second homeland, *"I live in a world with pain. The losses that I have been through. The anger in me. I can not get back there (to Cambodia) [so] I have to create my own little world here. ... This country gives me so many opportunities that I can not verbally express them all. I can do lots of things. I can get up and I am read to do something and this is what I want. All I have to do is work hard and pursue it. And I got it. I don't need to know the general or chief of province in order to get through to somebody."*



Sam-Oeun (Rady) Tes (Cambodian) was a member of the Royal Cambodian Ballet before coming to America. She has received several National Endowment for the Arts grants to teach classical Cambodian dance to youngsters in the community. Most of her students live in Northern Virginia. Her troupe performs throughout the Washington, DC area. She also works as a beautician near her Temple Hills, Maryland home.



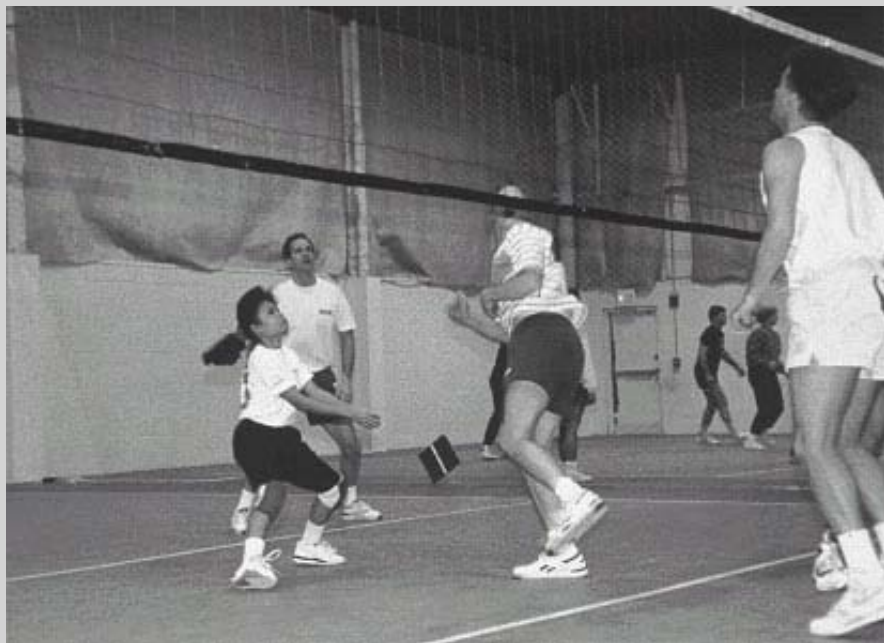
Sam-Oeun (Rady) Tes (Cambodian) with family
classical dance teacher/beautician
Temple Hills, MD/Arlington, VA



Panida Puccinelli (Thai)
vice president, First American Bank
Washington, DC/Arlington, VA



Supharak (Su) Pathammavong (Lao) came to America as a young girl. While outwardly she is very Americanized, inwardly she still honors her Lao heritage. In 1995 when she married an American they had two ceremonies--a traditional Lao one and an American-style one. They live in Maryland with their children.



Supharak (Su) Pathammavong (Lao)
Photos: Playing volleyball (top, left), teaching
foreign businessmen at Sprint International (top,
right), playing classical guitar (bottom, right)

Sisopha Mai Chavez (left) and
Bopha Mai Ram (right)
(Cambodian)
owners, Asian Grocery Market
Fairfax County, VA



Sisopha and Bopha Mai lived through the horrors of Communist-held Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge killed their father and five siblings, and separated the remaining family members. Their mother and a sister were last known to be in Vietnam collecting rent on family property. Sisopha and Bopha discovered each other when separately they joined a parade of people walking West. Together they made their way to a Thai refugee camp and there found their brother Somet. Prior to the communist take-over, Somet had worked as a waiter in a hotel frequented by Western journalists. Eventually, with the help of some of his Western contacts, the three of them and Bopha's husband (who she met in the refugee camp) escaped to the United States. They had no idea if their mother and sister were still alive.



Sisopha married a Salvadorian refugee in Virginia. Their commonality lay not in language or heritage, but in the similar experience of surviving in countries torn apart by war. In 1988 the extended family pooled money accumulated from many menial labor jobs and opened an Asian grocery store in Arlington, Virginia. Through a customer, they discovered their mother and sister were alive and living in Vietnam. After 17 years of separation they were reunited. (Mother, center, both photos)



Kim Chi Crittendon (Vietnamese) married an American and escaped from Vietnam with him during the last month before the Communist takeover. First they moved to the rural South where she ran a restaurant and began their family. They have three daughters. Later they moved to Northern Virginia where she went back to school to earn a master's degree in teaching.

Kim Chi is an ESL teacher at Abington Elementary in Arlington, VA. In the late 1980s when many of her students were Central American refugees she decided to learn Spanish. She studied the language in Ecuador for several summers.

Kim Chi hopes that when her students get older they will look back and recall, *“When I was young, my teacher always told me that you need to look at people with respect and respect the way they are. It doesn't matter what language, what colors, or whether they're rich or poor. Everybody has something to offer.”*





Kim Chi recounted a story about how she became a marathon runner:

“I’m a runner. I run. The first time I told people I want to run a mile they looked at me and laughed. They said, ‘Try fifty yards first.’ So I said, ‘Okay, that would be a good idea.’ The first time I picked up running, I said, ‘I want to get out and just run a mile. Why couldn’t I do it?’ Well, I couldn’t do it. I got to maybe ten, fifteen yards, I would pass out. I mean, I was totally out. So I said, ‘Wait until the day I can run three.’ I set my goal [to be that] I could run three [miles]. And then six, and then ten. [Later] I said, ‘Well, I wonder... by the time I reach maybe thirty [years old], could I do a marathon? And I did it, because I was able to space out and work out and say, ‘If other people can do it, what can’t I?’ [I ran] the Marine Corps [Marathon]—26.2 miles.”

Kim Chi Crittendon
(Vietnamese)
Arlington, VA



All these women are survivors and creators. They are role models for young girls, especially for Asian youth. In addition, they serve as a bridge between their community and other Americans. Through this documentary we hope that the American public will come to know a little about the strength of these women and their communities.

--Lisa Falk and Uaporn Ang Robinson

Thanks to all these women who shared their stories with us.
We hope that they are an inspiration to you.

Thanks to all who have supported this work:

- ❖ Organization of Pan Asian American Women
- ❖ Agnes and Eugene E. Meyer Foundation
- ❖ Hitachi Foundation
- ❖ Virginia Foundation for the Humanities
- ❖ DC Community Humanities Council
- ❖ The Center for Women/The Union Institute
- ❖ Asian American Faculty, Staff, and Alumni Association, University of Arizona
- ❖ Commission on the Status of Women, University of Arizona

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