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## Interview with Jeanna Tang

Jeanna Tang

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**Interviewee:** Jeanna Tang

**Interviewer:** Heather Bayuga

**Date:** 5/5/2021

**Location:** Zoom

**Collection:** Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Archive, SBS 322: Asian American Women's History, Spring 2021

**Length:** 29:09

**Transcribed by:** Jonathan Adams and Heather Bayuga

**Overseen by:** Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

**Bio:**

Jeanna Tang was born and raised in the Philippines. At the age of 18 years old, she migrated to Massachusetts to attend an all-girl school during a time of social unrest against the Marcos regime. She became the source of her family's migration to the United States. She joined the Auntie Sewing Squad as a Sewing Auntie and has made 1000 masks in 2020.

**Thematic Outline:**

(00:00- 02:43) Jeanna Tang discusses her childhood transition from the Philippines to America during the Ferdinand Marcos era under martial law. (02:44-9:08) Tang then talks about her immigration to the United States and how her education and independence shaped her as a young Asian American woman. (9:09-12:19) Subsequently, due to her early divergence from the Philippines, she then discusses her relationship with the Filipino culture and how it ties within her American culture. (12:20-22:46) Next, Tang speaks about the way she raised her children and explains how she balances both her cultures when spending time with her family. (22:47-29:49) Lastly, Tang talks about her journey with the Auntie Sewing Squad and how fulfilling it is to provide for her community. She also makes a comparison to the lack of government assistance in the Philippines and how that way of life instilled in her a shared ethic with the Auntie Sewing Squad of providing care for one another in times of need.

## Jeanna Tang Oral History Transcript

**0:01-0:22**

**Heather Bayuga (HB):** OK. Hello, my name is Heather Bayuga. Today is May 5, 2021. Our current time is 5:04 p.m. and we are conducting this interview through Zoom. We are here with Auntie Miss Jeanna Tang from Auntie Sewing Squad. We would like to say thank you for being here with us.

**0:22-0:24**

**Jeanna Tang (JT):** Thank you for having me.

**0:25-0:36**

**HB:** Thank you. Ok, so to start off, please tell us a little bit about your background, where you're from, how do you identify yourself as and where did you grow up?

**0:37-1:17**

**JT:** OK. So, I was born and raised in the Philippines. I spent my primary and secondary education at St. James Academy, where the administration of Maryknoll sisters became the cornerstone of my study habits and religious beliefs. In 1980, the administration was passed on to the Dominican Sisters of Catherine of Siena and shaped our apostolic life as young adults. So, 15 and 16-year-olds were tasked to serve the community on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy through preaching, teaching, health care, feeding the hungry and giving a drink to the thirsty.

**1:18-1:38**

**HB:** That's nice. Ok, so you mentioned you're from the Philippines and you came here to the United States and you came, you left the Philippines at a young age because of the dictatorship of Marcos under martial law. How was your experience leaving the Philippines?

**1:39-2:43**

**JT:** So, I grew up in the Marcos era. Hence martial law served as a prelude to a new society when martial law was lifted in January 1981, my parents feared for our safety and our future. It

was then my brother Glenn and I were sent away. At the time, proof of income was the main determining factor for a student visa. In order to qualify, we had to apply to two different embassies. My brother was sent to study in London, England, and I was sent to an all-girls school in Beverly, Massachusetts. Starting my independence in a foreign country was my absolute learning experience. That 15-hour flight to Manila, to San Francisco, to Logan Airport, seemed short when my mind was preoccupied with the what-ifs.

**2:44-2:56**

**HB:** That's crazy. Next question is, what are some aspects of your life that you had to abandon when arriving to the US?

**2:57-4:57**

**JT:** So, when I arrived at my school in Massachusetts, I had to abandon speaking my dialect, home-cooked meals, the hired chauffeur for the day, and Auntie Inday that washed and ironed our clothes. I learned how to wait patiently at the school cafeteria line, how to dispense a drink from a machine, how to crack the shell of a boiled egg, and how to maintain a conversation in English with confidence. So, after three months of eating bagels, and cream cheese, and drinking a glass of milk for breakfast, I started to miss home. Rice is a staple food in every meal, even breakfast. I miss Auntie Inday's greasy tomato omelets, the mystery meat in the form of sausages, and my glass of Milo, a chocolate milk powder drink. So, two years, two years of being spent appreciating the independence of young girls, being able to go anywhere, eat anywhere, or hang out with anyone and everyone which seemed at first ideal. To go somewhere with my friends, we have to take public transportation. To eat anywhere, I need to make sure that I have enough money for myself and for my friends because there's always that one person not having enough money, which led to hanging out with the right people and a financial savings.

**4:58-5:25**

**HB:** And was that all you have to say for that? Yeah, ok. Ok, my next question for you is what stories and or information was true about the US when you arrived and what was false? Because when coming here from the Philippines, you have these ideas that you see like on TV or hear like through people, but actually coming here. What did you find different?

**5:26-8:18**

**JT:** So, after getting my associate's degree in hotel management, they sent in my student visa under the category of practical training. So, I found employment in one of the downtown Los Angeles luxury hotels. So, from Massachusetts, I flew to California and found myself as a front desk clerk at the Westin Bonaventure Hotel. So, this massive fifteen hundred room hotel became my classroom of life for two years. In between, I met my late husband Ray, and eventually became a permanent resident and transitioned to a naturalized U.S. citizen. As the source of my family's migration to the United States, it is comforting to know that I am able to share the dream of living in the United States with my parents and siblings. Equal employment has been in the forefront of our adopted Western culture because, you know, in the Philippines, retail employment always requires strong verbal, written and comprehension skills in English. Critical thinking skills with a focus on issue resolution and customer satisfaction in typing requirements of 40 words per minute. You're applying for a retail job like one of those salesperson at Nordstrom Racks or at Saks Fifth Avenue, and you have to have all the skills to even be considered as an employee of the company. So, my mother finished third year high school and found employment at Albertsons and the deli department at age of 50 plus, I remember her telling me that American people take their smoke break every hour. They can sit around and remain idle for hours while she tries to find things to do to keep herself busy. And they have no sense of responsibility in practicing water and electric conservation. I just smiled and explained that America is such a rich country. People do not occupy themselves with such petty things. So having my mother find employment at her age, at her education level, was the epitome of what America is like for my family.

**8:19-8:29**

**HB:** That's very interesting. That's a story I wouldn't imagine hearing. Would you like to expand more on your mother or?

**8:30-9:08**

**JT:** So, I think, having this project, Heather, as far as creating a oral history, because my story and me memorializing my migration to the United States and the struggles of my family and I,

we're not even refugees, like I mentioned. We're not even political asylum seekers. We came here with the ideology of we can still have a better life. And it's not like we had a bad life back home. It's just that it's a better life, you know?

**9:09-9:25**

**HB:** That's understandable, yeah. And so, moving on to my next question. As an Asian American woman fleeing from her own country. How close are you to the Filipino culture?

**9:26-12:04**

**JT:** As far as being Filipino, I was able to balance all the practices and traditions from the old country, right, and blending it with the with Western culture. Being a mom of three young children and being born and raised in the Philippines, it was a constant struggle because the way they were raised, was totally different from how I was raised. I actually raised my children to have independence at a very young age. I raised my children to not look for rice and Filipino food at every meal. They grew up with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and spaghetti and pizza night. And the thing I value the most is actually spending time with my children. We actually have like on Wednesday nights as our board game nights, and we would just play Monopoly or Life for hours. Just having that conversation with children. That's like a void practice in the Philippines cause, you know, families are just so busy making through the day. As far as making sure that there's food on the table, that there is shelter and clothing. So, to me, not seeing that in my everyday upbringing, my children actually help me embrace the new culture and allow my children to actually talk to me with not thinking they're talking back. You know how Filipinos always every time there is children talk to them, they always feel like they're talking back. But to me, I see it as being able to express themselves. Being able to articulate what they're thinking and actually have some type of conflict resolution when they are arguing with each other, as always. Right, so I think with me, I actually became a better person looking at the intersectionality of my own children. Having parents from a third world country and being raised in this very Western culture that I'm not familiar with.

**12:05-12:19**

**HB:** Is there any like personal stories that you can recall that have made you question your Filipino culture?

**12:20-14:45**

**JT:** Yes. Because my mother always gives me a hard time with the way I feed my family. When they were growing up, my mom would always come visit, right, she would come visit. And she would, like I felt like, she wear her white gloves and go like this to my window seal, right, to see how clean the house is. Or she would look inside my closet to see how much clothes I bought or how much shoes I have. And then she starts putting all the whites together and all the colors together. And then she would fix my children like the usual sinigang and adobo and the pancit. And she would wonder why the kids aren't eating, you know, because it's not the way they were raised. I mean, if you want to eat cereal for dinner, go right ahead. You know, it's not like you have a fever or I'm starving you if that's what you feel like eating, just eat it. But I remember the children did remind me one time when I was talking to my oldest son, my oldest son said, Mom, I remember you say that it would be cheaper to buy a cow than by the amount of milk that we purchase from Costco every week because we go through, we go through a gallon of milk. So, I keep telling them, oh, my gosh, guys, it's cheaper to just buy a cow and put them in the backyard. So anyways, I love the idea that the children remember, like, the reason why I was strict with sleepovers. The reason the reason why I am strict with, what we call it, field trips, right. Go, having allowances, having independence in a way where you could watch a movie with just friends without chaperone. I still value the Philippine culture when it comes to something like that. I would even chaperone at Magic Mountain just to be there just in case anything happens, it's easier for them to reach out to me. I think that was a difference between having a balance of independence and being strict at the same time.

**14:46-15:42**

**HB:** That's very interesting, and I think a lot of Filipinos can relate to that. So for..

**JT:** Are you still there?

**HB:** Yes, can you hear me?

**JT:** Can I hear you? Hold on. Let me check my speaker.

**HB:** Can you hear me?

**JT:** I hope you can edit the video because I think my speaker is just like trying to compete with the computer audio with the external speaker but I hope you were able to hear my long spiel.

**HB:** Can you hear me now?

**JT:** Yes

**HB:** Yes ok. So my next question, where was that, by being the source of your family, migrating to the U.S, did it change your perspective on your role as an Asian American woman?

**15:43-18:44**

**JT:** Most definitely. I think because I was part of a culture where we are seen as submissive and subservient, right, but here women are embraced for being strong, being independent, being opinionated to some extent. I think I was able to practice self-control. Depending on who I'm talking to, if it's an elderly Filipino family, I try to guard myself in making sure that I maintain that Filipino culture and demeanor. But when I talk to a family that is from a Western background, I put in my two cents because it's acceptable. And additionally, the reason why I do that is because I don't want to be seen as, oh, do you still have dirt floors in the Philippines, right? I've been asked that before by a parent that I went to visit with one of my classmates in Massachusetts. They were so far removed from where the Philippines is located and where I'm coming from that they even asked me that menial, demeaning question of, do you live, do you live in a house with dirt floors? I was taken aback, but that's how some people see people like us, perpetual foreigners because of our phenotype. And I think that's one of the things that we need to dispel is we can speak, we can communicate confidently in English. But we maintain the language, the dialect, so we are not detached from our own mother country. And when I see my friends posting on social media that are they are needing support for donation, for sponsoring a scholar for this and that, you know, I just feel like, yes, they're asking me to donate. They're asking me to be a part of this bigger picture of change. Because I am blessed to be here. I am blessed with all this opportunities.

**18:45-18:58**

**HB:** Ok, so my next question that I have for you is: did you have to persuade your family members to come to the states or were they willing to immigrate?

**18:59-21:44**

**JT:** Oh, my mom couldn't wait. My mom couldn't wait. As soon as I got my permanent residency, I think three days later, I applied for a petition for my parents and my parents couldn't wait to get here. And it took a while because permanent residency at that time, it took forever to get a visa for your immediate relative. So, they would have to wait five years until I was like naturalized citizen. And after that, when I refiled the petition or updated my status within six months, they were able to come. My mom came right away with my sister, my sister at that time was 18 years old so she was still considered a minor. She turned 18 when she migrated here, and my dad was still working overseas. So, he had to wait until his contract ended before he can move with us. And then my brother, he went to college in London and ended up in the back in the Philippines because in London they don't give you any type of employment visa for the major that he took. He took avionics, and it you need to be a British citizen to even be a part of their air traffic control. So, I think it was just a wrong major for him to pick at the time. So, he ended up staying and waiting for nine years before he could join us here. It just took forever. But they were more than willing to come. My brother was just overjoyed. I remember meeting him at the airport at McCarran. We even have balloons and flowers, and I don't even like my brother that much, but I had balloons and flowers for him because I haven't seen him in forever. Because we went to college in two different countries. And when he came home, I was already here and trying to make a life for myself. So, we didn't see each other for more than fifteen years. So, we became friends as adults, which is, it's nice to go back now and say, you know, I remember when we were little, we used to fight, and you would beat me up and I would have rug burns and new things like that. But now it's like I remember when you picked me up the airport. I remember with the balloons and the flowers. You know, it's nice to hear that from him.

**21:45-21:56**

**HB:** Well, so besides your brother having, like, a postponement arriving to the US. How did you feel when your parents and your sister came over?

**21:57-22:46**

**JT:** Oh, I was I was so happy, overjoyed, ecstatic, all the superfluous verbs of being happy, because at the time I already had my son. I had my second son. And, you know, childcare is no

joke, and it cost me more for childcare than my actual paycheck. So, them coming to this country actually allowed me to re-enter the workforce. It actually ends up taking care of myself and my career. So, it was nice to have my mother. Of course, you know, she cooked for me. So, it was nice.

**22:47-23:01**

**HB:** Well, it's good to hear. Okay. So, I also have a few questions about the Auntie Sewing Squad. As a member of the Auntie Sewing Squad, can you tell us your role that you play and why you decided to join?

**23:02- 28:15**

**JT:** Back in April 2020, when I realized that COVID-19 would linger for a little while, I searched for a group doing community outreach to frontliners. And I found the homemade face masks of Los Angeles San Gabriel Valley chapter. So, the group provided the volunteers with a precut fabric, elastic and the YouTube videos to how to make specific mask. When the fabric donations tapered off, Candice Wong, the coordinator of the group, introduced me to the Auntie Sewing Squad. So, I continued to sew face masks with my own fabric since the need to put on masks on faces now reached the farmworkers and indigenous people of the Navajo nations in South Dakota. So, I finished off my 2020 donating 1,000 masks. So, altruism has been a part of me from the beginning. I find joy in knowing that with a 1,000 face masks, I possibly saved 1,000 lives. So, I will continue being a sewist for Auntie Sewing Squad because the need is so great still. Still, it's so great. And it's just, I've slowed down a bit and because of work, but I'm sure summer is right around the corner. And there's 22 days left of school, so I'm sure that sewing machine is going to be hot and toasty from all these face masks that's going to be made still. And since I'm a proud product of a third world country and grew up in a martial law in the Philippines, you know, the next question that you had given me was about the government and the lack of assistance. So, growing up in the Philippines, the inadequacy of government assistance was not really a concern. It was a way of life. You have to survive on your own. So, I continue to admire the rise of caring of humanity through the volunteers of Auntie Sewing Squad, the unceasing concern for all to reach out to remote and underserved communities. The care shown by the Auntie Sewing Squad leadership to foster that sense of sisterhood and sense of

family and the volunteers continue to sew. The leadership continues to send us care packages. We have like Secret Santa all year long and we exchange ideas or simply connect relentlessly to show someone out there, continues to rely on her help. So, it is a very exciting group to belong to. I mean, I ended up buying my sewing machine because the need was so great that I had to buy a machine that would actually put out, you know, at least 50 masks a week when we first started. So that sense of helping, if not me, then who? So, I've always looked at things as things are given to us for a reason. I mean, growing up in the Philippines, we have to learn how to cook. We have to learn how to sew. We have to learn how to crochet. We have to learn how to clean. Really? So, I think all those things that happened throughout my life, the journey that I have to go through to reach where I am now actually helps with keeping that volunteer attitude. And sometimes it's too much on your plate because you spread yourself thin. But it's such a good feeling. It's such a good feeling that you can actually help. And I always end my day and this how I'm going to end my interview with you, I always end my day by saying, Lord, gives success to the work of our hands. Because that's all I can ask, is anything that we do with our hands. We're blessed with all these skills, so it's time to share those skills to others.

**28:16-28:33**

**HB:** Wow. Thank you. Thank you for being part of the Auntie Sewing Squad. It really means a lot to not only me, even though you're not providing masks for, like, me directly, but like to the people in need. It's very inspiring to see you do that.

**28:34-29:31**

**JT:** And thank you, I hope I didn't overextend myself and just blah, you know, end up being long winded because when I saw your questions, I felt that, oh, my gosh, someone's going to listen to my story. And it's nice to be able to share like I said, not everybody came in as refugees or political asylum seekers, we're just ordinary folks wanting to have a better life for ourselves. And it all started with my parents having a vision of Philippines is not going to offer you the opportunities that America can offer you. So, I think it's a beautiful way to share my experience with you, especially, you know, being young and born and raised here. Your family's story is totally different from mine. So it's nice to be able to do that.

**29:32-29:33**

**HB:** Yes. Thank you.

**28:34-28:39**

**JT:** Good luck to your schooling, and I hope you get an A+++ on your project.

**29:40-29:49**

**HB:** Thank you. And I hope you have a great night, too.

**JT:** All right. Thank you. Have a good evening.

**HB:** You too.

**JT:** Bye bye.

**HB:** Bye.