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Interview with Mai-Linh Hong

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Interviewee: Mai-Linh Hong

Interviewers: Edna Ruiz, Lucia Neal

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Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Bio: Mai-Linh Hong is a Vietnamese American woman, she was born in Vietnam and grew up near Washington D.C. Hong is an author, editor, and Assistant Professor of Literature at UC Merced. Prior to joining the Auntie Sewing Squad, she ran an Etsy shop and its proceeds went to anti-racist and feminist organizations. As an Auntie, she actively donates masks but is also currently co-editing the Auntie Sewing Squad's new book.

Thematic Overview:

(00:00:00) Mai-Linh Hong discusses her childhood and what it was like growing up just outside of the DC area. (00:07:06) Hong shares a bit about her writing both academic and personal as well as her current book project on refugee storytelling. (00:10:00) She discusses when she learned to sew and how she has used sewing to support anti-racist and feminist organizations. (00:16:33) Hong talks about her Etsy shop and how she decided on donating the proceeds to anti-racist and feminist organizations. (00:23:06) She talks about how she realized early on in the pandemic that there was a need for masks and how she started sewing them to help out. (00:29:00) Finally, she talks about what she thinks is the most interesting part of the Auntie Sewing Squad: its humorous and caring culture.

Oral History Transcript

[00:00:00]

Lucia Neal: Okay, great. Hi, this is our interview with Mai-Linh. Am I pronouncing that right?

Mai-Linh Hong: It's Mai-Linh Hong.

Lucia Neal: Mai-Linh, Hi. You are with the Auntie Sewing Squad, correct?

Mai-Linh Hong: Yes, that's right.

Lucia Neal: I'm Lucia and this is Edna. We are from Professor Lau's Asian American Women's History class.

Edna Ruiz: Okay. Uh, we just wanted to start off with our first question of what was your childhood like?

Mai-Linh Hong: So that's a pretty big question. I grew up in the Washington DC area with my parents and my younger brother. My parents and I immigrated from Vietnam. We came as refugees when I was a baby and [I] grew up in Northern Virginia, just outside of DC. And I guess I would say my parents worked a lot during my childhood there just, you know, having come to the country, you know, very poor and not, you know, not having the English language skills and so forth. They always had multiple jobs that they were working. My brother was born after we arrived here. So I remember my childhood as being very busy. And my parents always had small businesses in addition to their full-time jobs, and my brother and I helped out a lot with that. And as I got older, you know, we became more stable in terms of, like our financial security. So we, you know, we did buy a house, like we had what we needed. And I was, you know, glad for that, but it also was still kind of a stressful childhood in some ways. It's just the way that you help your parents navigate when English isn't their first language and all of that, you know, everything that comes along with having immigrant or refugee parents.

Lucia Neal: You said you came here when you were a baby, how old?

Mai-Linh Hong: I was 10 months old when we left Vietnam and we left by boat and we spent some time in refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines before going to the United States. So I think we arrived when I was probably a year and a half or two around there.

Edna Ruiz: You mentioned growing up near DC. Do you have anything you want to add about that? Like what was it like growing up near DC? [00:02:53]

Mai-Linh Hong: It was a great place to grow up. And you do get a little bit of a skewed view of the country or of the world. For instance, you know, I didn't know that museums charged money until I was an adult. You know, there's just certain resources like having the Smithsonian there and, and also just people working for the government are, you know, it's very, very common for

folks to be either federal government employees or contractors or working for the military. And so I think I grew up in an environment where it was very, very normal to be around folks who were in service in some way, like who were doing some kind of public service work or were in the military. And my father was a South Vietnamese Army Lieutenant. And I think just given the history of the Vietnam War, you know, he always had some friends who were American veterans of the Vietnam War. So I think all of that came along with being in DC and that sort of environment. But it was also a very, very diverse area, which was great. You know, my high school was one of the most diverse in the country. We had about 1,100 students who came from about 40 countries. Pretty much every language you can think of, every religion was represented there. So it wasn't just that there were, you know, one or two minority groups, even, it was just like a huge mix of people from lots of different backgrounds. So I took that for granted a little bit. I didn't realize other parts of the country weren't necessarily like that.

Lucia Neal: Have you ever gone back to Vietnam?

Mai-Linh Hong: Once, not until I was an adult and this was maybe six or seven years ago. Uh, my parents and my husband, and I went back to Vietnam. And my husband is not Vietnamese. And so for him, it was, you know, he was able to be a little bit more of a tourist, I guess. My parents had been back several times, and, visiting Vietnam as an expatriate is a really distinctive experience, and not like going, you know, if you're not Vietnamese. So there's a lot of family history and family connections to navigate. For me it was very illuminating and very difficult in a lot of ways because there's a lot of traumatic history, you know, involved with how and why we left Vietnam. And then the relationships between Vietnamese, the Vietnamese government and expatriates can be a little shaky. So we had some of those things to contend with. But I learned more about my family history. I met some extended relatives and I think that one of the most striking things about it was, they all knew who I was, but I didn't know who they were because I had grown up without them. And, you know, growing up with so much of your family so distant, and for much of my childhood, there weren't diplomatic relations between the US and Vietnam. So it wasn't even a possibility to like, visit. There were, you know, letters and long-distance phone calls once in a while, but, that separation was pretty severe. And so, you know, having grown up relatively isolated from my extended family and then going back and realizing that I had, you know, lost all of those connections when we left Vietnam and that they, you know, knew who we were, they remembered us. I realized, you know, what you really lose with this kind of migration.

[00:07:06]

Edna Ruiz: Okay, um, moving a little, uh, changing subject, I guess. Could you share a little bit about your writing?

Mai-Linh Hong: Yeah, you know, these days I'm primarily an academic writer. I am a literature professor. I write, you know, essays and I'm working on a book. But I've always written creatively as well. So just from a young age, I've written poetry and fiction and memoir-type pieces. And so more and more these days, I'm trying to integrate some of that into my academic, like my scholarly writing, using personal narrative, and so forth. So writing's really important to me. And it's a major way that I express myself and, you know, engage with the world.

Lucia Neal: You said you were a literature professor. Where are you teaching?

Mai-Linh Hong: I'm at UC Merced. Physically, I'm actually still in Pennsylvania because, I started the job at UC Merced last July, but because of COVID we put off the move, so we're actually now packing and getting ready to move. So we'll be out there in a few weeks and I look forward to getting to know California and Merced.

Edna Ruiz: You mentioned you were writing the book. I don't know if you can even tell us about it or like what, what is it about?

Mai-Linh Hong: Sure. Yeah. You know, as a scholar, I'm writing a study that has to do with refugee storytelling and specifically how refugee stories are made and how they're used in the context of refugee migration and all of the constraints that refugees live under. So, the book is called *Perilous Telling Story in the Shadow of the Refugee Regime*. And it is in some ways like a study of like what happens under refugee law, culturally, that refugees have ways of gathering and synthesizing and producing knowledge in the form of stories. And we're talking about a population of people that has very few resources. And so I'm thinking about story and storytelling as a kind of strategic resource that refugees have always used to create community. To make their way to get the things they need. I'm not saying it's always a successfully used resource, but it is one, you know, it is a striking one. That's part of, uh, the kinds of culture, like the kinds of cultural production that refugees engage in.

Lucia Neal: Because you are part of the Auntie Sewing Squad. Can you talk a little bit about your background in sewing?

[00:10:00]

Mai-Linh Hong: Yeah. So I have always sewn. I actually don't remember learning how to sew. And I've written a little bit about this, but, you know, my mother taught me to sew and to knit and crochet when I was a child. And pretty much any Vietnamese person you talk to knows people who sew or they sew, themselves, I don't know why that is exactly. But it's very, very common. And so I grew up, you know, my mother made things and I have always made things. So, I consider myself a creative person in the sense that I'm always making things. Whether it's through writing or through a form of crafting at different points in my life, I've done more sewing versus knitting, and then other times I've done more knitting. Right now I'm thinking about taking up woodworking, you know, like there's always something else going on. I think it's really important to have that ability and that activity going on, especially with academic work, because scholarship is very slow and it doesn't necessarily produce tangible results, you know, very often. And if you've done much, you know, academic writing, that you kind of know it can be sort of a lonely process and you don't have the kind of immediate, tangible productivity that you might always want. And so I've always had some crafting or crafting-type projects on the side. And that helps me, I think, to kind of refresh my brain and, you know, keep me going. Like it gives me a kind of momentum and it's also very, I find sewing to be very relaxing work. If you do too much of it, of course, it's, you know, or if you don't have a choice and you have to do it, then that's different. But I [have] been privileged to be able to sew, you know, as a hobby and, and to do it as a kind of mindfulness practice. It's been really beneficial for me that way.

Edna Ruiz: I think even during this time I feel like it's even better to practice all of this. Moving on a little bit, you said or you mentioned that you used to run an Etsy shop. So could you tell us a little bit about the time that you spent running the Etsy shop?

Mai-Linh Hong: Yeah, I was living in Philadelphia. This was a couple of years ago. And I was on a writing fellowship, so I was really fortunate to have some time off of teaching and to live in a different place and just to focus on my research. And I started an Etsy shop that sold baby and toddler items. And all the money was donated to anti-racist and feminist organizations. This was during Trump's presidency. I was, you know, very stressed out as most people of color were in the United States. And just the political situation, a lot of specific things that were going on that year were very frustrating. And it felt like I needed to, first of all, have something to do that made me happier, which was making things, you know, making things with pretty fabric especially, but also like using the money, you know, to support causes that I cared about at a time when I think they really needed support. You know, it's a way of just making a small contribution. So I can actually share the link with you. I saw that one of your questions was what are the organizations that I supported? I'll stick it in the chat. The shop is on hiatus, there's nothing being sold in it, but if you read the shop description, it actually lists a lot of the organizations that I had donated to. And then if you click on the past sales, there's like 70 something sales. If you click on that link, then that shows you like the items that were in the store in the past, so you can see.

Edna Ruiz: Oh wow, thank you for that.

Mai-Linh Hong: Yeah

Lucia Neal: So you said you were donating all the proceeds to activist organizations. Was that just something you decided or what was the, really, motivating factor in that?

Mai-Linh Hong: I wanted to be able to contribute something and I was in, you know, a fortunate position of having a job and an income, so I didn't need income from the Etsy shop necessarily, but it was my way of, you know, raising money. So that I could donate more than I would normally have as an individual, you know, without the shop. And it was a good, like sort of a community-building activity too because I got to share the shop with my networks. And folks, I think, enjoyed buying things that they knew the money was going to a good cause. I probably lost money doing it because, you know, just the cost of materials and shipping and everything. So, you know, it was definitely an expenditure on my part, but I was able to raise, you know, more funds than I would've been, you know, able to donate on my own. So, I had a lot of folks who were contributing specifically because, I mean, they wanted to buy a bib or whatever, but like, you know, they specifically were willing to pay a lot of money for a bib because the money was going to support, you know, transgender rights or, you know, Black farmers or, you know, whatever it was.

Edna Ruiz: So as a previous Esty shop owner, are there any, like, tips that you would pass onto somebody who wanted to open up their shop on Etsy?

[00:16:33]

Mai-Linh Hong: I'm probably not the best person to ask because it was never my intention to like grow, you know, a big business on Etsy. So I probably wasn't the best in terms of, like, figuring out how to get your shop noticed or whatever, like it was sort of a one-woman operation and, you know, I had to keep it manageable. But, you know, you have to think about like the concept of your shop and like a shop can't be too diversified in its, you know, the things that it sells, like if you have a specific type of thing that you want to sell, then it's easier to come up with a name that makes sense to do some branding, to come up with a logo, where, you know, all of this sort of fits together into a concept that people can recognize and that's basic branding, right. And so it might be that you are able to do five or six different crafts and make all sorts of things, but that doesn't necessarily make for a coherent Etsy shop. So I would say, you know, figure out what your concept is and what is the thing that you want to market and try to build the shop around that.

Lucia Neal: And what tips would you have for someone who would like if they opened an Etsy store and they wanted to donate the proceeds to an activist organization, where would you recommend they start?

Mai-Linh Hong: You know, I think at the time, it grew pretty organically because there were some organizations that I was already supporting or wanting to support like the Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights, for instance, and especially given the really draconian immigration policies that were in place at the time and the, you know, the family separation crisis, I specifically started out donating to organizations that were addressing those concerns. And I expanded to organizations that were anti-racist in other ways or different kinds of social justice organizations and specifically ones that had a feminist bent. I think, you know, if somebody else wants to do this, they have to figure out for themselves what, you know, kinds of organizations they support, ask around in their networks, do your research, you know, look up the organizations and find out what they do and how they spend their money. And I think it's also really good to look for smaller organizations where your donation can make a big difference for them. I think everyone recognizes like the ACLU or, you know, something like that, but they have like major donors lined up, right? They don't sort of need your $200, you know? But if you're able to make a few donations that are, you know, on the smaller side, that's something that an Etsy shop like that could generate. It's great to find, like, local grassroots organizations that are doing work, where the money, you know, is going directly to benefit the community. There's not a lot of overhead. And they're doing work that you can really see and engage with. And that can be, you know, that can be very rewarding personally. But I think it also has a really good impact overall.

Edna Ruiz: Okay, what brought you to the Auntie Sewing Squad and like, and what motivated you to join?

[00:20:30]

Mai-Linh Hong: So, my friend, Chrissy, your professor, actually invited me to join the Auntie Sewing Squad because I was already making masks at that time. I mean, you know, the pandemic from pretty early on, I think it was clear to anyone paying attention that masking was going to be important to the public health response, even though our government resisted that idea for quite a

while. And, you know, the last administration never got on board really. But you know, from early on, it was clear from looking at the experiences of other countries, especially Asian countries, that masking was important and sewing masks was something that I could do and that was fairly simple. I wanted to donate masks, so I joined a few different sewing groups that were coordinating donations. So a couple of those were in my local area. I wasn't real comfortable with those groups. I didn't feel that my, like, sort of my ethics around sewing and donation matched those of other members of the group necessarily. And I experienced, some, you know, weird interactions with older white ladies who, you know, and seeing, you know, posts in the groups that were Trump supporting, which made no sense at all, but I mean, in a mask sewing group, but anyway. So, once Professor Lau brought me into the Auntie Sewing Squad, I mean, I could just see right away that it was very different and being led mostly by women of color and specifically Asian American women. And the group was overtly political in the ways that I felt comfortable with and believed in. And it was also clear that, you know, so in groups where initially mostly serving healthcare workers and essential workers, because at the beginning of the pandemic, there was such a shortage of masks that even, like, nurses working with COVID patients were not being supplied. And so it was, there was a clear need among essential workers and healthcare workers. And, you know, but once the supply chain kind of got worked out for those employees, some sewing groups sort of said, okay, well, our job is done. But the Auntie Sewing Squad from pretty early on realized that there were communities where COVID was going to have and was already having a disproportionate impact, mostly communities of color and indigenous communities and very vulnerable communities like those who were incarcerated, sex workers, people without houses. You know, it was like there were communities that were not being reached, these were folks who couldn't buy masks and, you know, couldn't necessarily organize to ask other groups for donations. So the Auntie Sewing Squad was, like, proactively seeking out organizations like local organizations that were working with those communities, so that we could get the masks to those who needed them most, even after essential workers were pretty much supplied through the regular supply chain. So I really believed in what they were doing. So I was glad to be able to join the effort. So that was in April or May of last year.

Lucia Neal: What is your role? Do you only sew masks and provide those or within the Auntie Sewing Squad?

Mai-Linh Hong: I sew. I am primarily a Sewing Auntie. I have made a total of around 4,000 masks, I think. But I also became an Editor Auntie, so, Chrissy and Preeti Sharma and I co-edited the Auntie Sewing Squad book, which is a project that we never, ever anticipated doing, you know. And it has been an amazing experience and process and just like a really meaningful way for the three of us to connect with Aunties. And also to kind of process and document our experience over the past year. So, I'm a Sewing Auntie and an Editor Auntie.

Edna Ruiz: You mentioned the Auntie Sewing Squad book. Could you tell us a little bit about that? Cause I had no idea that was a thing.

00:25:22

Mai-Linh Hong: Yeah. So, we got a book deal. The Auntie Sewing Squad began getting quite a bit of media attention last spring and summer. Kristina Wong, the performance artist who started

the group, you know, she was on *Good Morning America* and *CNN*, and you know, like a lot of national media organizations were covering the work that we were doing because it was kind of a quirky, like heartwarming sort of story, I guess, like during a time that people were scared and stressed out. And I think the story of the Auntie Sewing Squad had a certain appeal to it like that these Aunties were, you know, making masks for donation. And we, of course, wanted to spread the political message that came along with the work that we were doing. And so the media coverage was perfectly fine with us for that because we had a message to get across. But one of our aunties is Rebecca Solnit, who is a feminist journalist and writer. She's written a lot of different books. And she regularly writes columns like for the *Guardian* and such. So she has been working with an editor at the University of California Press and kind of brought up the idea of an Auntie Sewing Squad book to him. And it sort of took hold from there. And myself and Chrissy Lau and Preeti Sharma signed on to be the editors of the book. The three of us are scholars, we write, you know, like putting together a book, and publishing a book is part of what we do. Like we sort of havethe inclination and the skills to do it. And so we were able to contribute in that way. And so we really fleshed out a vision for a collective book project that would feature work by Aunties. And so it's structured around five themed essays that are written by, mostly Asian American studies scholars actually. Plus Rebecca Solnit has an essay in it. And then there's a foreword written by Kristina Wong in her persona as the sweatshop overlord, which is her sort of dark humor way of leading the group. And then we have like dozens of contributions from Aunties that are short creative pieces and artwork and photography. So it's a beautiful book, it's coming out in October. Let me find the link, stick it in the chat for you. And this also has got to be like the fastest academic book, like, production process that I, you know, like academia just doesn't move very fast, but, we, I think, probably finalize the contract in like July or August and the book's coming out in October. I mean, we, you know, submitted our first draft of the book in like November or something. So it happened really fast and of course, we've continued to work on it since then, but right now we're in the final stages of proofing the book, like just final, you know, corrections and stuff before it comes out.

Edna Ruiz: Wow. That's so cool.

[00:29:00]
Lucia Neal: I think we're almost out of questions here. What would you say is the most interesting part of being in the Auntie Sewing Squad?

Mai-Linh Hong: Hmm, I think the group has a certain culture to it. And there's a lot of humor and a lot of care involved in what we do and we're all working through a pretty traumatic and stressful time. And the pandemic has been a huge tragedy, you know, and atrocity really because it didn't have to be nearly as bad as it was. It was a failure of leadership that got us to where we are. And so being in that situation and seeing the inequities and injustices that abounded during the pandemic was very difficult for many of us, like who came from communities of color or immigrant communities and, you know, or were formerly incarcerated or worked with incarcerees. The pandemic was hitting those communities hard and in that environment, you know, plus the anti-Asian racism that was exploding all year. You know, it's very grim work and very difficult and tiring and costly work, but we also manage to have a group culture that is very supportive and funny, cause you know, sort of have to laugh at things otherwise you'll cry. And so there's a lot of dark humor in the group, including Kristina's threats to cut off our fingers if we

don't so fast enough, and jokes about child labor, because some of us were recruiting our children to help. And like we were working in such ridiculous circumstances. So I think what's really striking to me is like the community that formed and like the distinctly like loving, angry, funny, like, mood of the group.

Edna Ruiz: Okay, we're down to our last question. Could you tell us about your connection to our Professor, Dr. Lau?

Mai-Linh Hong: Yeah. So she and I know each other through Asian American Studies, which is the field that we both specialize in and, you know, I actually can't remember exactly where I met her. It must have been through a conference or something along those lines. And so we've kept in touch over the years. And at the beginning of the pandemic, she told me she was starting to sew and she knew that I sewed. So we actually set up some zoom dates and like sewed together. And she brought me into the Auntie Sewing Squad. So it's been an amazing, collegial relationship like that we've been able to collaborate on, you know, on work together, like to produce this book together. And she's, you know, just an amazing person, like a supportive friend and a wise person. And so it's been cool to develop that relationship too over the course of the pandemic.

Edna Ruiz: That's so cool, um, okay. Well, then that concludes our interview for you. Thank you so much, Mai-Linh.

Mai-Linh Hong: Yeah. Thanks for doing this.

Edna Ruiz: Yeah. Thanks for coming. Thanks for answering all of our questions.

Mai-Linh Hong: All right. So good luck with the rest of the project.

Edna Ruiz: Thank you

Lucia Neal: Bye.

Edna Ruiz: Bye.