

Race and Oral History Project, University of California, San Diego

Narrator: Sheng Xiong

Interviewer: Julianne Woo

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JW: Wait, let me take everything off. Okay. And then, um, So whenever you are ready, you can start.

SX: Hi I the interviewee Sheng Xiong here by transfer to the university, the rights to publish duplicate or otherwise use the recordings and transcribing interviews and any photographs and our videotape footage taken during the interview. This includes publication rights in print and electronic forms such as on the Internet, the right to rebroadcast the interview or portions thereof and permission to transfer the interview to feature media.

JW: Sounds good. So, I guess we can just start now. Hello, I don't know to who [laughs]

SX: Formalities...[laughs]

JW: I am Julianne Woo. Today is May 21, 2020 I'm here on a zoom call with Sheng Zhong and just to talk about her life. Um, what she's up to these days. So, how are you doing?

SX: Yeah. Oh, is that a question?

JW: Oh, sorry. Just like how are you doing?

SX: Oh sorry, it didn't register in my mind. Well, now that we're in day 75 of quarantine [laughs], I'm doing well. I just had a huge deadline yesterday. So I've had to take it a little easy this morning and then I have a ton of work that I had to like just ignore to get this deadline in and now I'm like I don't know how to spend my evening, do I work or, you know, do I go to the store before people rush to it this weekend because it's a three day weekend. So that's where my mind's at.

JW: Yeah. I appreciate you doing this for me since you have a million billion things to do!

SX: No, no, I'm happy to assist the deadline was a lot of pressure

JW: Okay, so I am just going to start off with could you just explain what it was like growing up in your family and in your community.

SX: This takes me back to the neighborhood that I grew up in and remember fondly with my parents when they first moved to Merced, California. The first came to Portland. In I think 1980 or 81 there and then had and they came with my four older siblings and had my sister, a sister in Portland and in Merced they had my other sister and me. And so, we live on the street called Ellen Ct, which was this, like, you know, long like cul de sac of like apartment complexes. You know, like eight to 10 or some apartments in each complex, but it was a lot of, you know, Hmong refugees, because, you know, they tend to, you know, there's, you know, go to one place when they get to like a new city and that happened to be one of the main neighborhoods that there were a lot of Hmong people, there were other like races there as well, but I think just having that kind of community to where like you, you know, like your mom could go across the street downstairs, upstairs to the neighbor like just, you know, just because everybody really knew each other and like or is related, you know.

And then I think what have best memories of living on that street was like the donut man because he would come and in his donut van open his bag the bag and then like you'd see like the all the donuts and it was like the best part of the day. So, uh, you know, I think everybody like just like always so excited for when the Donut Man would come. And you know, I don't know, it may, I mean donuts or not hard to love [laughs].

So, but it's maybe love doughnuts forever now and you know just playing all kinds of like little kid games, you know, we would do, like we have this like rubber band thing that it's not like Chinese jump-rope anything, but Hmong. But I don't if you ever YouTube it you'll, you'll know what I'm, I mean, but that playing rocks. I mean, like, just climbing like trees in the bag playing marbles and there used to be these things called like pogs.. I don't know if it's probably like what Pokémon is to like kids now, but like, you know, something like that maybe didn't have as long of a time as Pokémon has lasted, but just all of that with the neighborhood like kids, you know, it just felt like there were always people, like out and like just made it feel like comforting.

JW: Yeah. Oh, that's really nice. Um, could you as much as you want to talk about...discuss your family's migration history.

SX: Yeah, so, um, so both of my parents were born in Laos and, you know, during the Vietnam War. You know, they fled to Thailand to the refugee camps and they came here, and I know that my dad had a part of his time, you know, fought with the military and the, you know, that was led by General Vang Pao. And I know that my grandpa had to like I don't remember the story very accurately, but like just he had to, I don't know, do something pay something or other like to, you know, so that he could, like, come back and not you know have to fight you know because as, as you know, you know. Yeah, I don't know if you know this but, you know, a lot of Hmong men died. And so, there were a lot of widows, but, you know, we lost a huge part of like us like a huge group of our Hmong people and a lot of them being men as well.

You know, there are many stories that come with that, you know, to where you know men then had more than one wife, right, or like somebody who is a widow, you know, who lost her husband would marry the younger brother, or, you know, just because it's such a huge number of Hmong men died during the Vietnam War.

And then so you know they lived in Thailand and came here in the early 80s. I'm actually wearing a shirt that says "1975" on the back [turns to show me the back of the shirt] and it's like an image of like a like Hmong story clock because they kind of like stitch on like kind of does history or among people or just to like show what long life is like folk life like you know farming and things like that.

But what was the part I wanted to get to get at? Hm, coming here- Oh, yeah! So, this was last summer because now we're getting to this summer I was going through all my family likes. There are photos right just all the pictures that my parents have kept over the years and you know a lot of pictures. We just have online or are in our phones now. Right. So, the physical pictures that we still have that are, you know, old and at least developed right I put him into like New photo albums and. And so, I went through my whole family's kind of like history because my parents, you know, they keep everything [Laughs].

And so, I was like, well, let me try to like in my own way curate this, you know, right, so I got like this binder and I put like their citizenship in there. I put their pictures of, you know, that they had to take when they immigrated here and maybe it could show you that, too. I don't. Um, and so, you know, just all like the documentation, like when you arrive, here's what you do things are, you know, we would throw away because it's like mail right but they kept inside like this is really like, I don't know. It was really like healing to, you know, because you see kind of like my history, you know, my parents like wow, and just like things like... Then I saw like you know just, you know, my, my dad had the like. You the plane tickets that they had that they came with and I was just like, oh my gosh.

I'm like this is so like so 40 years now, you know. Wait 45! And so, you know, I hope that like my nieces and nephew can, like, look at these and remember you know their grandparents us and just know they're kind of like history of coming to the United States and, you know, being part of a new like American history. But m, you know, I was like okay I don't need to get emotional. [Laughs]

And I'm answering, in a way, so he want to ask something specific. Feel free to interrupt me because I'll forget to what the question was. And just keep

JW: I'm like, wait, what did I ask, Oh yeah, no, no, that's really, no. That's really beautiful. How do you, or what ways do you see to kind of keep that memory of your memories... being kept alive? Like as you said, with your nieces and nephews, and how do you think yourself growing up in America, how do you think it changes that?

SX: You know, I didn't really feel connected to my roots until, like, you know, the later years in my life so far right, I think, like, of course, growing up as a child, your environment, kind of like set everything for you and then you kind of grow into your own person and you know assimilate or adapt to your new environment. And, you know, a large part of that was school for me. Right. So, I, for me, this is how I feel like I never ashamed of, like, who I am, my culture anything but when I'm around like white people like in school, especially growing up. I just feel like ashamed. You know, like, because we were so different. We're so different and I feel like because we had

so much less that it was just this like in the structural shame that was kept on me. But so, I didn't really like feel as proud to be Hmong in my adolescent years

I think I assimilate I tried to simulate a lot more to like white culture because that's, you know, when you grow up watching Disney and you know TV and then that's cool and read books at all those narratives are like very white. Right. And so, I think I was you know, that's what I strived to be and then it wasn't until, like, you know, in college, not even in college, I was like, totally, like, not conscious at all. And, you know, still with that mentality of whiteness, right? Like and as I mentioned before, like dropping out now or, you know, leaving college or not without graduating really put me like on a different path because I mean it was a lot harder. I think, then you know what I thought would have been a different path for me. But, so, you know, I didn't graduate and then I came back to Merced and...

Actually, when I first went back to San Jose to live my sister for a little bit and like of course it was just really hard. And not with her or anything, but just because I couldn't like find work and things like that. Right. So coming back to Merced, and I started volunteering with the group, a high school group that I was part of to that, you know, really kind of supported like among students in because it's a service, right, but then like a like a volunteer to be like a co advisor for them and then put me on a path of meeting, like other people that I'm, you know, led to my first job of working with youth.

Like the group of people that I'm I then met was actually from...so I did this leadership training with a group called Leadership Development within Interethnic Relations. I think they have a new name now but they're from LA. And so, I did this training with them and it just brought like a new level like consciousness, you know, for me, because it validated my like hardships my struggles, everything that I was experiencing. To where I was just like, oh, this maybe this is not me. There are other people who would this happens to you in this, like, you know, it felt like I was a person of color for the first time. You know and who had experienced like institutional institutionalized oppression and racism, right. And so I think that kind of put me on a trajectory that you know has led me to where I'm at now and where I feel that I have reconnected with my culture, a lot more and care about it, care about where I come from my roots in, and I think it's also part of growing older to like your identity like matters a lot more. So how, you know, like

I live with my like one of my nieces and nephews right? And there's in high-ones a freshman and once the seventh graders and middle school, high school and you know I work with high school, I used to work with high school youth. Right. And so, I tried to instill in them, like, you know, going back to your roots and honoring them and things like that, your ancestors, all of that and you know I feel like...My influence isn't is probably deeper or wider. I don't know the word, but with youth that I work with, then at home. Because, you know, even though I'm their aunt and like they're not my kids. I don't. I don't rear them right. I don't like to tell them I don't really tell them what to do. It's like more like their parents. And so, I don't know how I can make share this with them and other than to like to take our family like precious heirlooms and things like that and photos and stuff to just keep for them so that they can understand.

But if they were *my* kids. Oh, trust that I would be like hammering into their heads like you are Hmong. [Laughs] And I'm you know I'm showing them a lot more of what I think will help build

that character and confidence. So, you know, yeah, I tried to, like, make it fun and like enjoyable for them to learn like, but then like it's not as deep as I think I would go if it were like my own kids, you know,

JW: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Um, I guess, I guess I should have also mentioned this before you were raised in Merced, California, and you still live in Merced, California. And so, um, could you just also...I mean, you've definitely touched on this but describe what Merced is like.

SX: Yeah, It's really sad because a lot hasn't changed, either right from the time I was born in 1985, you know, um, and to 2020 now it's like...The progress like part of growing up in the Central Valley is very it's predominantly conservative and you know there's a lot of like, you know, Trump supporters here. You know, I think, politics, definitely has become more polarized than in the 80s. Right.

Growing up here just felt like, okay, you know, but even now nobody really knows where Merced is. I think UC Merced has really put Merced on the map. But before that, it was very hard to explain where Merced is. And so, I would say, so I left for college to Santa Barbara. Right. So, I was gone for like maybe a total of six years. And when I came back. It just felt like nothing had changed. You know, I think that's that was part of like what like...I feel like...

There's, there's nothing really that I feel like I'm like that. It was becoming more inclusive or anything, you know, more progressive. It stays more status quo. And so that's kind of the rhetoric of what Merced is like.

For example, a city in Merced County in it's called Atwater and it's much smaller than Merced, but it is its own city like it literally declared itself a sanctuary city for businesses. Like it was, it took such an egregious spin on what sanctuary cities are for undocumented folks and made it for pro-business people because they want to reopen right now. I swear, people here are in like the KKK here still right, especially in Atwater

There's a lot of progress that has been made undoubtedly but then there's also so much more of that status quo mentality that it's hard to make change. You know, when you have a consistent board supervisor and even city councils that are very much to the right or like they could be moderate but...[laughs] Moderate here is probably still conservative elsewhere.

So yeah, but at the change within the last, like, you know, almost 35 years for me is that I'm not much other than I've changed. I've grown up. You know where I can say that like...progress is slow. It's really slow and trying to make any changes is like your it's an uphill battle.

JW: Yeah, thank you. I always like to hear about people's like growing up experience because I feel like a lot of factors that like subconscious factors that we're not aware of definitely shaped our positionality and like the place that we grow up in. how we like be the world and how when we grow up. We realize how like...I don't want to say brainwashed, but kind of like...um,yeah, maybe.

SX: Oh yeah, oh, I completely feel like I mean I'm probably still brainwashed. Who knows but especially in my adolescent like yeah and like early 20s. Those years like a totally brainwash whitewash mentality. You know, like just striving for whiteness in so many ways that it is literally like a compromise, my whole being in stripping away my Hmong identity, you know, just from having a white name to dressing up to please people... you know it's not even just white people because a lot of people have adopted that whiteness mentality is what's acceptable and what's not. You know, like, even when I wear more cultural like pieces or clothing, you know, you can get looks. So, I, I totally understand what you mean.

SX: There's something else that came up. I forgot. So, I've been working off a such little sleep to

JW: I'm sorry!

SX: I realized, even when I was in my meetings earlier. I was like, gosh, my words are not very like my thoughts are not very complete today.

JW: I understand perfectly what you're saying, so you're good. Um, but yeah, if you remember it. You can just like jump in.

Okay. Um, what was like, I know you've talked you were talking about how um when like the home that you were growing up, it was a Hmong community that you had. But what was it like at school, like how what backgrounds? Did your friends come from...?

SX: One more thing I'll mention about, you know, just growing up is like, you know, when there's like seven, eight of you living in a two-bedroom apartment like it's like I like what my sister and me. We slept in the same room with my parents forever. [Laughs]

So, it made me think about who like how with COVID right... Gosh, it triggered me so much when I saw like pictures like of people who like had to Zoom from their home, you know, And like their background even though you can put fake backgrounds, but like still like I would be so stressed, if this if it were me in my days or like when you know when we were like, when we have less I would have been so like I would have felt even more ashamed. You know, like that shame really accumulates, if I had to Zoom from home. I was like, "thank goodness". But they think about the kids. Now, who, who, you know, didn't have who don't have much like how my parents and us. We didn't have much growing up. Yeah it just triggered something. Anyway, school, growing up. That's what you asked right?

JW: Yeah, like what was like the background of your friends.

SX: Most of my friends are moms and you know I will admit this, like, I even tried to make friends with white people, you know, because I thought that was like, like the cool thing to do, right, because I was ashamed of who I who I was and I wanted to really like have this... You know, you read books and you watch TV shows about being like, you know, the popular girl and stuff. So I was, I had that mentality. And so, although my friends were always Hmong. You

know, probably because I wasn't accepted into white groups. But like it's always been like, I'm always like, so glad I would hang out with Hmong people. [Laughs]

SX: I was really, for example, we had Hmong class taught at our school as an English as not English, but as another language class, right. So, you know, being too embarrassed to take Hmong, I took Spanish. And not even feeling like I, you know I have my own language. You know, like, and there's nothing against people who are taken a link another language course than their own. Um, but I did it. I know I did it, though, because I was like embarrassed for being Hmong. And thinking "Oh, Hmong is not a language that other people really use, I should learn Spanish." and you know it's been curious to, again, there's nothing wrong with wanting to learn another language. But I know definitely when reasons I didn't take Hmong class was because I was embarrassed.

And it makes me really sad when I think about it that you know then because I wish I wasn't because now I really wish I knew how to read and write Hmong.

Even like dating I dated this white guy like for a long time. And like, not that I regret it or anything...but maybe it do [Laughs]

No, but like even striving for like that kind of whiteness. Again, there's nothing against dating white people! Or outside of your race right but so here's something like, I think that could be controversial is like you know I do encourage people to date and marry within their race, you know, I used to be like oh multiracial, blah, blah, blah, blah. Like, no you should date your own. I'm becoming my mother! [Laughs]

You know my opinions have changed now. But definitely, everything was like white. When I was an adolescent at least trying to attain whiteness.

JW: Yeah, I remember we talked about that in our other meeting and about like something like language course how choosing to learn your own language is yeah I don't know shameful or embarrassing and it's like if you're not spending every moment trying to assimilate to white America, it's like you feel like you're doing something wrong or like you feel like an outsider.

SX: Like your behind actually! That's how I try to think now. Like, no, I need to go the opposite way of what I would have thought.

JW: Yeah having to like to remind myself like actively like unlearn, a lot of the stuff that we've been conditioned to...yeah

SX: Decolonize the mind.

JW: [Laughs] Yes!

Something else I wanted to ask. So that was a lot about childhood...Oh, this is one question. I do want to ask, actually, um, could you either describe like either like your favorite food growing up your favorite food now...any like favorite smells or any just memories from like home.

SX: Of course, I think, food is such a, you know, huge piece of piece of our culture. And I think that's one of the reasons I'm like, you know, I'm so glad to have Hmong friends because you just get so much better food than like white food. Like your taste is just so much more mature. I'm just considering the things we eat, you know but, I mean, there's definitely like aromas like from the kitchen that really remind you of like being in a modern house, you know, even the smell of like rice. You know, it's like in the rice cooker steaming all the time you know just like herbs you know that your mom uses to make like chicken and the broth and like I have that I actually have a book it's just called "Boiled Chicken for the Soul."

It was written by the collection from Hmong people. It's just those classic comfort dishes like just pork and grains or like bitter melon, or just all these like veggies that are like Asian veggies you know that you really don't get like white grocery stores that you have to go to American stores for. You know, because my parents farm so like, you know, they always grew like the... I can't think of words I need. But like, basil, mint., I don't even know the other words for the vegetables that they grow but like the herbs that just have, I can't even like I would, I probably wouldn't even be able to name them. But I know what they look like, right and you just know that there's smells, you know, their sense and how that brings a level of comfort that just like I'm sure anybody could tell you, like, just the smell of home.

I mean just even now my, favorite dishes like there are classic dishes that you just know that Hmong people make from khao poon. Some, some of them don't have names right because you just know what it is

JW: Or there's no English translation.

SX: Right, and the ingredients, they don't the dishes don't have names, you know, just classic ingredients that we use. And like, it's so interesting to me cu like some of my like nieces and nephew, like they don't like to eat. And I'm like, I feel like my generation we never had a problem! It's probably because we didn't have enough to eat right? But their generation, some of them are so like feeding them is like you're forced feeding them in a way because like they don't eat or they're picky and I'm like, "What? I never had that problem!" But like, so like when we make like even things like egg rolls or like our, our, some of our what I call like really good dishes. Right... They're not into it and we're like, you don't know what good food is, you know, cu they rather eat like burgers, or like pizza, you know, of course, the good greasy fast foods...like chicken nuggets.

And then just like these kids don't know what's good food. I think as they're growing old, like growing up to 16, 17, 18. You know, I think they are more open to it. So, I, I hope that only grows for them and then they realize, wow, I had all of this great food in my culture all along. I will just into this white food when... That's definitely something I've also come to appreciate.

It's like everything that I think whiteness makes you think you want... your culture already has. Your people already have and they can't teach you something you already know. One of the things I just want to tell them is, please don't let a white person teach you about your own culture learn it from your parents, learn it from your grandparents. Learn from your own people, you

know, you have that gift. It was it was a given right to you from birth, you know, so that's something that you don't get in white culture, you know, so this is for you. And you should realize how special and what a gift that is.

SX: So, so whenever I think of, I see ideas and things like that and how do we take those ideas because sometimes I think they're very white ideas. Right. And, like, make it Hmong or whatever your culture is... you could come up with something even better with your mind and your culture. You are born with and have cultivated to create something and not to strive for whiteness should be for it.

So, I don't know that made sense but...

JW: No, I think that's really beautiful. I think, yeah, that's just a common experience for like people who live in the diaspora. They go through like a period of trying to assimilate and then once you get older, like, "What was I doing? Imagine how much richer my life could be!" Um, but yeah, I mean, that's very common experience.

SX: Yeah and I'm interrupting you. Sorry.

JW: Oh no, I was done.

SX: That's I tried to like reach youth now to, like, say, "Hey, the sooner you know this, the better." Then you can go and do great things and be...and credit being Hmong more instead of crediting whiteness. For example, sometimes I'll get asked the question, like, who were the influences in your life growing up? When I first answer those questions, I answered, "Oh, my teacher." Who is always white right and I'm like damn, are those really my role models only? You know, and I get I got really sad. I'm like, I didn't even say my mom or my parents because maybe I'm trying to give an answer that if they want to hear but then like I'm like, no, if I really think about it, it's, it's the people who give me live right my parents and like or like even relatives that really influenced me or like my older brother who like really looked out for us.

You know, like those are the role models that actually like who built my character and resilience. And so, like I always credited my white teachers and not to any of their discredit but like I just realized, who, who do I really need to be grateful for. And those are the people like you know who are closest to me right but so that's why I kind of just want to show young people to not be ashamed to be proud of your own people. And give credit to them when you succeed. Not your white mentor or professor. It was the people who you are standing on the shoulders of who are lifting you.

JW: Yeah, that when you brought your teachers that reminds me of that statistic where it's like if a child who is Black has like a black teacher growing up there, much like the percentages of them like succeeding and going to higher education is just like a lot, like the percentage is much higher. And so, did you ever have. I mean, I think I may know the answer to this. But did you ever have like a Hmong teacher growing up-

SX: No.

JW: Okay.

SX: No, especially when I wouldn't take Hmong class! [Laughs] But no, I can't say that. I did most of my teachers were white women and I remember a handful of teachers of color, to be honest. I didn't have my first teacher of color like probably high school. I mean, like I'm in biology. She was a Black teacher. And then in Spanish, she was Latina. But yeah I can't recall having a teacher of color until high school.

SX: So, I think that that's a lot of people's experience, you know, and I think that's a problem. We need to change that. Hopefully with ethnic studies right that we increase the number the representation of teachers with the student population.

JW: What about when you went to university?

SX: Yeah, you know, you have, it's still a lot of white professors. You even get white professors teaching your people's history. But you definitely are having a little more exposure there because you know, college is totally different. Right, it's still very white the structure of course everywhere we go. It's still very white but there's more representation as you go on.

JW: Have you ever been to Laos and have your parents, been able to go back?

SX: Unfortunately, I haven't, and neither have they, and I think that was something that they've always wanted, you know, to visit and I, it is my dream to like to take them, but my mom has gotten really sick within the last like three to four years. And so, I know she can't travel anymore. I mean, she's on dialysis like three days a week. So, um, but my dad is relatively healthy still and, you know, if I could even like take my dad back to Laos and like Thailand to visit I think with maybe my uncles and aunts, like that. I think that would be like a dream come true for me because they haven't been able to go back and I feel like my parents were a little bit of the older generation when we Hmong people came to the United States. My aunts and uncles, who are younger than my parents, you know, they, I see a lot of them have gone back a few trips already, but my parents have this haven't been able, and maybe because we've been poor. [Laughs]

All my siblings and I were in a better financial situation now to where a trip like that would be more realistic. It's just my mom's health now is a lot worse. Yeah.

JW: I think. Now I'm. That was a lot about past and childhood I think now I'm just going to transition to you in the present and now. And so, I think this is a question that they wanted me to ask, but I guess for future listeners I am working with Ma Vang who is a professor at UC Merced. So, could you just explain how you met Ma?

SX: Yeah yeah. I am really happy that someone like Ma is in Merced. I didn't meet her, but I remember the first time I saw her was working in my previous job as a youth coordinator, and we were at the city council meetings and she came there she showed up in support for some of the things we did. And so, I didn't formally meet her yet until more recently, like last year I started working with her. And she was part of this Hmong professionals' group in Merced and

my brother was a part of that too. So, I went to one of their meetings because they give out scholarships to high school seniors and I helped kind of evaluate the essays and stuff. And so, I had reached out to her because I wanted to work on kind of developing some kind of maybe a curriculum or something. But like with another like I'm older Hmong women that I work with, because you know she's closer to my parents, she thought, my parents age. She's younger than them. But she's like an aunt to me right but she has worked with, like, in the community for a long time doing interpreting and so I was like, you know, what we really need to like write this so that other Hmong professionals can learn as they go into their fields and have the language to still be able to convey among because a lot of their clients or people that they have to work with are Hmong. And many times, these professionals like social workers or health workers or even like other fields, they don't have the ability to communicate effectively with, you know, Hmong people, especially among elders.

So, I was like, you know, and, and just seeing people like come up, like, you know, who are coming back from college back to Merced right who have left for college and want to come back and do something good for their community that they were raised in. And also, let's put together like some type of curriculum that can really, that somebody could use to self-teach you know I'm just you know how to best integrate like Hmong language and culture and everything into just social services, public health, everywhere, right, and then just even in organizing to

But so, we were starting it off and then like it was just really unfortunate that the other women like she, her husband just got really sick, too. And so, she just didn't have the time and they had a lot to make a lot of trips like to Stanford and Sacramento and stuff where and most of their kids live in Sac now. So, it was just really hard for her but so we never got to really do this project. So, Ma and I decided to do you know do something different. And so, I was working with another person. Her name's Amy and she's a little younger than me, but we developed a curriculum for Hmong youth, and it's not in Hmong unfortunately. But like what it is for them to kind of start having more of a like identity consciousness. You know, like, you know, I didn't, I didn't want to use the term identity crisis. Right. But then like more of becoming conscious of who you are.

And so, we put together this like curriculum that we then facilitated with some Hmong students at UC Merced so Amy and I did that and so getting them to start questioning in there, you know, late teens, early 20s how valuable your culture is to who you become

And so, Ma and I have stayed connected until then. She'll reach out to me and then I told her about the work that are now doing. And then she you know she kind of filled me in on what she's have each what she said enough for next fall and then with this Ethnic Studies course. I'm like, super interested and she told me that we can work together to kind of just like facilitate ideas or, you know, generate ideas and just be connected to other ethnic groups, you know, to really make these ethnic studies classes really impactful.

JW: Oh, that's really nice. Could you also talk about what you're doing now, what projects you're working on? I know in our meeting you [said] you have interest in like the environment and housing justice so if you could talk about that.

SX: Wow, you have good memory. [Laughs]

SX: I now work with a group called Leadership Council for Justice and Accountability and they are...you know we're in the Central Valley and in the eastern Coachella Valley. We work in communities, especially like the unincorporated areas in this city property, but a lot of unincorporated areas to help advocate for a right to housing right to clean water right to, you know, all these just the air quality, like you just said environmental justice. But it's just so hard to organize in the Central Valley period but getting people to go speak at city council meetings or board of supervisor's meetings is challenging, especially when people have been so oppressed and these are spaces that are very oppressive, you know, just with their procedures even if you can speak in your own language it's still intimidating. Like, even during this pandemic, where you have to email your public comment or you call it in, even when I leave voicemails as a public comment and like shaking or nervous because it's such an oppressive place and institutions.

Trying to get residents to advocate for themselves whether it's like, you know, an eviction moratorium right with this happening a lot of people have lost their jobs and have less income. Now, and those who don't qualify for like the stimulus package or unemployment, you know, or if they get paid on the under the table, like, you know, they're struggling as well. And so, we're, right now, because there are eviction protections at the state and federal level. Once the emergency orders lifted, though, like those protections go away. And if people can

You know, make their rent in the next month or two, you know, maybe they're struggling, but they're getting by right now but as the recession hits. I think people are going to see like or how maybe struggle more to make rent and that's when if we, you know, if we start seeing people get evicted like that's going to be concerning because you're exposing them to more of a health threat you know cause COVID-19 is not going away anytime soon.

So, getting them to advocate for themselves and say, like, you know, like we need to adopt an eviction moratorium so that we can't simply force people to move out just because they can't make the rent you know for non-payment of rent because they have been affected by this pandemic.

During this time, like a lot, you know, maybe some people will workloads have lightened up or work has slowed down. I feel like for us. It has increased. Because you know of the advocacy work that we do and because bills are still getting passed all the time. And so, you know, they're being written up there being passed.. So, you still got to get people calling in to make public comments, you know, and just especially like those that affect housing. That's one of the biggest things that we fight for is a right to fair housing.

So, this work, you know, hasn't slowed down one bit with Covid. And you know, we, there's also like unincorporated areas. Do they have clean drinking water, you know, access to clean drinking water, things like that, or do and do they need to connect to, like, a larger water system. Making sure that that happens. And then also just like how we look a lot at land use and development, where new homes are going to go where you know how land is being zoned so that to determine what's allowed to be built on there right and just making sure that zoning doesn't continue to be

exclusionary you know where they're building like all these nice single family homes on one side and then like all this affordable housing which is great, but it's going into neighborhoods that are hot that have high concentrations of poverty. Right. And so just making them more equitable and making sure that, you know, affordable housing is being built throughout the cities or counties.

JW: Yeah, thank you for sharing that, I mean, this question also kind of overlaps with what you just talked about, but with that work that you're doing, what communities do you serve? Is it just like Hmong communities and have you I guess maybe this would be a two-part question? So, I can say it again, but how has liked the Hmong community in Merced been affected – you've kind of already touched on it - but how have they been affected by the pandemic?

SX: Yeah, so I do work with Hmong residents and we're actually in a place called like Beachwood, Franklin, those are basically two streets in this like this neighborhood that's not incorporated in the city. So, it's just kind of on the outskirts but it's not its own city either. There's something called like a community plan update. Every like every county, city has a general plan and then like they have planned for like small pockets of the whole entire community. And so, the, this, this area is actually going through a community plan update so that they can either, you know to plan for development, their right to just kind of, you know, update things and then plan for future things to for what can come there.

We're participating in that process, but with COVID going on this county has kind of like stopped in their tracks. You know, like they haven't been meeting about it. I haven't seen any updates on their website and I you know communicated with staff via email but doesn't seem like anything's going on. So, like this community is kind of left hanging like okay so what do we how do we know that we're going to get a plan that involved the community when they haven't been able to participate because nothing's been happening.

So, I think the pandemic almost makes it easier to ignore community input because there'll be like, well, we couldn't do anything you could do is call in and the in email. And a lot of the Hmong people they don't read or write. They speak the language, but you don't have to read or write it. And so, you know, they're not able to express, you know, their concerns and articulate them in a way that is acceptable for the county.

I think what we see right now to is...the ball drops right and then before you know it, there's going to be a community plan update develop that doesn't really reflect what the community wants or has said. This is where we try to insert ourselves and push for more, you know, advocacy in community engagement like having it done well, right, because a lot of times cities and counties will like just to have what they'll go through a process that they're required to do to engage community, but it's really exclusive in that...For example the border supervisor meetings are on Tuesdays at 10am it's not really an accessible time for people. So, they'll continue to get excluded like people you know they it's intentional that these processes are exclusive so that people don't participate, so that they don't speak up and they have to go out of their way to be heard.

That's the kind of the continue like injustice that we see. But we can't do anything about. We're trying, though, you know, we're trying, but it's not easy to get people to make a public comment.

JW: Thank you, thank you for sharing that as well. Um, I just wanted to end it with just some more lighthearted questions. What is the first thing that you want to do when the pandemic is over? I know this will be a long time but something you can't wait to do?

SX: I think like many people. I mean, if I didn't live with my parents. I know that I would want to see them first. But because I live with them. I do get to see them so like the next people I'd want to see are like, my friends, you know, just eating and drinking again. [Laughs]

JW: [Laughs] And give them a hug!

SX: I just see them in real life and not through Zoom

JW: Yeah, that's. Yeah, that's a really good answer. Um, and I know we kind of talked about this in our other meeting, but I know you started to listen recently need to like Hmong music. What are other interests or hobbies do you have?

SX: I mean, music is definitely a big one. And there's this among virtual concert tomorrow night. And I'm just going to mention it real quick because I'm kind of excited, because during this time, it really showed how people can think of new ways of doing things right and like even a concert like they were able to get like Hmong singers in my Thailand and, you know, other countries because then all you have to do is put the camera on them. Right? And so everybody's watching. And it's like, Oh my god, we never thought we'd see these people ever or like even some really older singers and stuff like, oh my goodness there was a they had a richer content, like maybe a month or so ago and it was this Hmong artists who I use, you know, when I was really little, and living on Ellen Ct. I remember his songs and so when they had him because he still is in like Thailand. I think Thailand.

I don't even know his name right by know his songs and so I'm like, Oh my God, it just made me think of Ellen Ct., again, you know, and growing up. And so, like these virtual concerts have been able to connect us a lot more than a lot more easily than we even like thought was possible. So, music has been such a great like way to cope through the pandemic to

What else, other just hobbies? Honestly, I've been working so much more. But this is really like cheesy but I've been watching a lot of video on skincare. [Laughs]

JW: It's important!

SX: Yes! I've been like by all of these skincare products. And I'm like, I've never spent this much on skincare before. But then, like I said, I really like a watching Gothamista. I don't know if you know her, but just getting her tips and advice and things like that. And then I started using the Then I Met You product. Um, but yeah. So, it's been weird. I've also been watching you know like Real Housewives, like there's not much to do! [Laughs]

I play. Do you, do you know the game 13?

JW: No, I don't.

SX: Okay, so it's like it's a Vietnamese card game and now they have an app called Pig Hunters and so I'm like, Oh my gosh, I don't know...this is the way I spend my time my downtime. Listening to music. But yeah, but just you know staying home and like it though. Like, um, you know, it's, I'm so grateful that my parents I here and then we'll have some Zoom calls with the, you know, our family. So that was nice because we never even done that, you know, so it was like just endearing to kind of like have that family connection via phone, all together.

JW: Yeah, it's really nice. Oh, I was just going to say that I started listening to a lot of podcasts and they're always like, okay, do you have anything to plug. So, I don't know if you wanted to talk or like promote or have anything to plug or where people can find you. I don't know.
[Laughs]

SX: [Laughs] So I may, I don't have like plugs like that. But, um, I was just going to say I was looking at questions you sent and I think like you. And one of the questions says like something with the self-care. And, you know, whether that's during the pandemic or not, you know, just always a good practice, but especially during this time.

Just needing therapy. Therapy with and I you know I don't see I don't currently see a therapist, but I'm very interested in in finding one who is of color, preferably a woman of color, right. I mean, if you could be Hmong women that would be amazing. But, you know, but you know person of color, a woman of color who also uses like social justice, you know, in as you know in their work and seeing, you know, the oppression as trauma as being a person of color like you know, I have very high expectations for this unknown therapist that don't have. [Laughs]

You know, that's what I would like. Right. But because I don't have that I turned a lot to social media, right, like on IG. I follow all of these amazing therapists of color women of color who are therapists and like they're putting their work out there for free and you know you can pay their, you know, they have Patreon accounts or something that you can like, you know, make donations and stuff.

I've been getting a lot of myself care from that just the wisdom that they so freely give and share. I think is so valuable for people seeking their own light therapy. You know that who can't afford to get a therapist or find one that fits them. I rely on those, you know, their, their words a lot and quotes and they're just offering ways of thinking, you know, I learned from them. And so, um, so that's my plug! [Laughs] But yeah I love IG for that.

JW: Yeah. Yeah, it's like really great, its social media has its problems, but and yeah

SX: It offers other things as well, like many things. There's pros and cons.

JW: Mm hmm. Is there anything else that you wanted to say that you haven't touched upon?

SX: Um...Gosh. You know, being in the state of mind that I am I. There's not nothing specific I would hope that there are a lot more young people who become interested or hopefully they already are. But who would want to take Ethnic Studies courses and just more cultural courses

and fight for them more because they're already smart, but if we don't give them the opportunities to apply that smartness, such as like a class like Ethnic Studies. They don't get to use it. And so, then they're forced to learn in white settings that it's just not applicable it you know it doesn't register. I just thought of, like, you know, even like English courses. I'm like, Are you still reading Lord of the Flies? That's like, Come on! We have got to like to get past this. You know, it's really annoying.

But yes, I hope this makes some major difference for the way you know people color are able to learn in these oppressive structures. In the future I hope that changes.

JW: Yeah, that was great. I'm going to stop the recording, so I guess. Yeah. That concludes the interview!

SX: Awesome. I hope that's helpful.