

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Southeast Asian Immigrant Project

Immigrant Experiences

O. H. 826

TUONG VINH DANG

Interviewed

by

Porncharas Arirachakaran

on

May 20, 1981

TUONG VINH DANG

Tuong Vinh Dang was born on March 17, 1961 in Saigon, South Vietnam, the son of Sum Van Dang and Ly Mong Van. Tuong was attending Phuoc Duc High School when the Communists took over his country in 1975. He quit school and worked as a mechanic in a garage for a few months. Staying at home until 1978, he and his elder sister, his younger brother and his mother tried to escape from the country. He lost his sister in the first escape. Finally, he and the rest of his family arrived at Indonesia and Brunei. Staying in a refugee camp for many months, he and his family were sponsored by Burita of McDonald High School to come to Youngstown in July 1980. He is now studying eleventh grade at McDonald. Planning to bring over his father and his younger sister who escaped to China, Tuong would like to quit school and look for a job.

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INTERVIEWEE: TUONG VINH DANG

INTERVIEWER: Porncharas Arirachakaran

SUBJECT: Saigon, Communists, student, freedom

DATE: May 20, 1981

A: This is an interview with Tuong Vinh Dang for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Southeast Asian Immigrant Experiences, by Porncharas Arirachakaran, at 327 Hayes Avenue, McDonald, Ohio 44437, on May 20, 1981, at 7:20 p.m.

Tuong, where did you come from?

D: Vietnam, Saigon.

A: This is your birthplace?

D: Yes.

A: Can you tell us about your family, your parents? How many sisters and brothers do you have?

D: I have two sisters and one brother. My oldest sister is dead. My younger sister, she is in China now. My father and my younger sister are in China now. I live with my mother and my brother together in this place.

A: What did you do at wartime?

D: I went to school.

A: Do you mean when the Communists came to the country, you went to school?

D: After the Communists took over I quit school.

A: Where did you go?

D: Work.

A: When the Communists came, you quit school?

D: Yes.

A: Do you remember about your school before you quit school?
Talk about your school. What was the name of your school?

D: Phuoc Duc.

A: What grade, at that time, were you studying?

D: Seventh grade.

A: You were in seventh grade when the Communists came so you quit the school?

D: Yes.

A: What year?

D: The Communists came in 1975. When the Communist party came, I had quit by that time.

A: What did your father do at that time?

D: He was a businessman, a small business.

A: At Saigon?

D: Yes.

A: Did he sell something?

D: Chicken feed.

A: Can you tell us about any significant events that happened in your life? Things that you remember most in your life like your school days, your home life, the things that you think are most important that happened in your life--tell me stories that impressed you.

D: Can I tell you about the war?

A: Yes, anything that impressed you. How come that impressed you?

D: I was very little in 1968. At that time the war started and in front of our house . . . Oh, it was terrible.

A: What do you mean in front of your house?

D: Yes.

A: In South Saigon?

D: Yes. It was very terrible.

A: You mean a lot of people died?

D: Yes, a lot of people died. A lot of people were damaged by the war.

A: Why did you decide to come to this country?

D: Because it is very difficult to live in Saigon.

A: You said that you quit school and you worked. Do you mean that you worked with Communists for a while?

D: With a private business.

A: Do you mean your father's shop?

D: No. I was working in a garage. I was a mechanic.

A: How many years?

D: Oh, just a few months.

A: What did you do after that?

D: After that? Then I stayed at home and then into 1978 we escaped from Vietnam.

A: 1978? Can you recall your journey? How you escaped?

D: In the beginning we took the boat.

A: You came with your family?

D: No, just my mother and my one older sister, and my brother and I--four people.

A: Why didn't your father come with you?

D: Because he and my younger sister escaped to China.

A: Before that?

D: Why?

A: Why did they escape before you?

D: Because we didn't have enough money to escape together.

A: Can you tell us about your journey now?

D: The first time we took a small boat, about 600 people on that

boat. The boat was too small and a lot of people and then the boat sank in the harbor.

A: The storm?

D: No.

A: Too many people?

D: Too many people were on the boat, yes.

A: Where did it sink, do you remember? Did you say in the harbor?

D: In Saigon.

A: How many days before it sank? Were you on your way or hadn't you started yet?

D: We hadn't started yet.

A: It sank before you started to escape?

D: Yes. My older sister couldn't swim so she drowned. My mother and my brother and I were saved. Then after twenty days we took another boat and went to Indonesia, but the government of Indonesia wouldn't allow us to land.

A: Then what happened?

D: They wouldn't allow us to get off the boat and they threw us into the high sea and our captain took us to the Philippines. We lived on the boat about eight months. We couldn't get off the boat; we just lived on the boat for eight months.

A: Do you mean from Saigon to the Philippines about eight months?

D: No, from Saigon to the Philippines about sixteen days. When we arrived . . .

A: Why did you come here? How did they contact or how did you contact with the people outside?

D: We don't have any family in this country. We just wait for the sponsor of the church.

A: Just a second, after eight months the Philippine government allowed you to come in the country or what?

D: We got on the small island. It belonged to the Philippines and then we lived on there about five months. After that, the Philippines and the United States sent us to the refugee camp.

A: On that island?

- D: No, not on that island, near the capital of the Philippines. We moved there and lived there six months. Then we came home.
- A: Who was your sponsor?
- D: Father Ruritz.
- A: What church?
- D: Catholic.
- A: Where? In McDonald?
- D: Yes.
- A: He sponsored all of your family? Three of you?
- D: Yes.
- A: Where in the States did you enter?
- D: We entered in San Francisco first.
- A: Why did you come to Youngstown? Because your sponsor is here?
- D: Yes.
- A: They paid for everything for you, even the ticket?
- D: I don't know exactly about it because every refugee . . . When they go to the other countries they don't have to pay anything. Maybe after we found our jobs we just pay back the government, like pay the taxes or something like that.
- A: You escaped from your country in 1978 and when did you arrive in America?
- D: July of 1980.
- A: How did you hear or learn about the United States before you came?
- D: Just a little bit.
- A: How did you hear about it? How did you learn?
- D: When I was in the Philippines we heard about it. In this country, the first thing you had to learn was the language.
- A: English?
- D: Yes, English.

- A: When you went to school in Saigon, did you study English?
- D: No, just Chinese and Vietnamese, that's all.
- A: Why did you choose the United States? Did you have choices?
- D: Yes, I could wait there long. Any country that accepted me, I would go there.
- A: The United States accepted you first--you found a sponsor first--so you came here?
- D: Yes.
- A: What was your first impression of America?
- D: The language.
- A: What do you mean? You couldn't speak any words when you first came here?
- D: It's difficult for me. It's hard for me. The first time I came and people talked to me, I didn't understand them.
- A: Where did you start to learn your English? In school?
- D: Yes.
- A: In McDonald?
- D: Yes, McDonald High School.
- A: How long did it take you to study English so you can speak like that?
- D: About ten months.
- A: Do you mean intensive courses like you just learned to speak, to write, and that's it?
- D: Yes.
- A: Did you continue your school at that time?
- D: Yes.
- A: You studied too?
- D: Yes.
- A: What did you think about life in a new country, life here except language difficulties?

D: We enjoy the freedom.

A: What is the definition of freedom in your own opinion?

D: I can do anything. We can do anything we want, not like Vietnam.

A: What is the difference in Vietnam? Do you mean after the Communists took over or before that?

D: After.

A: How about before that? Did you have freedom too?

D: Yes, but not like here.

A: But after the Communists took the country, you felt like you lost your freedom?

D: Yes.

A: Because they took your shop too; they took all your property?

D: Yes. Every young man had to work.

A: You too?

D: Yes.

A: You didn't tell me. You said you worked in a garage. You worked in the field too?

D: Yes.

A: Do you mean grow rice?

D: Yes, grow rice and grow everything. Not everyday, just about twice a month, sometimes three times. They forced you to do that. I didn't volunteer to do that, the Communists forced you. Slaves.

A: And they tried to separate your family or you still stayed with your family when you worked with them?

D: I stayed with my family.

A: But they took all your property?

D: Yes.

A: Did they pay anything for it?

D: Yes, but not enough.

A: What do you mean? What did they pay?

D: They paid just for food, but they didn't pay enough; they just paid half like.

A: How about food?

D: I was making it.

A: You made food?

D: Yes.

A: What did you make and how did you eat? Do you remember how you ate at that time? What did they provide? Rice?

D: Rice, yes.

A: Was it a limited quantity like for one person is this much?

D: Yes.

A: Like you said, it's not enough. How about meat? Did they provide any meat, beef, pork, chicken?

D: They didn't have many meats in Vietnam because they sold to the other countries, to Russia.

A: Instead of their people?

D: Yes. Even if you have money to buy it, it is hard to find?

A: What did you eat?

D: Rice.

A: With what?

D: Sometimes with vegetables, corn, things like that.

A: Did they pay a salary too, like per month? Like you work with them and they pay money per month? Money for you too or did they just pay for food?

D: Just plain, old food. It's every young man's responsibility to work on the farm. If you are a worker, belong to any factory, then they just pay the salary. Just like a soldier, you don't know. I mean I worked on the farm and then they paid for the food. They paid for food for me. If I didn't want to work, they won't pay me. They wouldn't pay that.

A: Do you mean they would let you starve?

D: Yes, starve.

A: But you have to work for it, for food?

D: Yes, it's every young man's responsibility.

A: You are a student at McDonald now?

D: Yes.

A: What do you think the difference in the school at Vietnam and the school here is? What are some differences that you can see? Like the way they teach and how about your friends, your first day in the classroom, how did you feel?

D: Everything was so strange to me. But we didn't have the homeroom in Vietnam like here. In the morning you have to go to that room first and then after that you go to the other classes. In Vietnam it was just one class in the morning until afternoon, the same class. They didn't change classes.

A: You didn't have to run around. How about the teachers? In Vietnam, the same teacher teaches everything?

D: No, different. After the period changes, then the other teacher came.

A: How about your first day in the classroom here, how did you feel? Do you remember how you felt?

D: Excited.

A: About what?

D: About everything being so strange.

A: At that time could you speak English or just a little bit?

D: Just a little bit.

A: How about your friends in the classroom, classmates? How did they treat you?

D: They just looked at me.

A: They just looked at you?

D: Yes.

A: Anybody talk?

D: Yes, some people talked to me, but I didn't understand.

A: Do you have close friends in school?

D: No, just friends, no close friends.

A: How about living conditions here, do you like them?

D: Yes, I like them. I like the snow, but I don't like the rain because it makes everything melt.

A: How about food? Do you like American food?

D: Yes.

A: Everything?

D: Yes, almost everything.

A: Do you eat at school too?

D: No, I eat at home.

A: How about your religion?

D: Religion?

A: Yes, were you Catholic before you came here?

D: We didn't have any religion before.

A: What do you mean you didn't have any religion? When you were a child you didn't have any religion? When you were small you didn't have any because your family . . .

D: Yes, because of my family.

A: And now you've become Catholics?

D: Yes.

A: What do you think?

D: I just feel God loves me.

A: Do you pray?

D: Yes, we pray to God.

A: What do you pray? What do you want?

D: Peace. Sometimes I pray for what I want.

A: Peace in what? Your country, I mean your old country or peace all over the world?

D: Yes.

A: Do you pray for your father to come?

D: Yes, I pray for my father.

A: He is in China now?

D: Yes.

A: Do you still contact with him?

D: Yes.

A: What did you do once you were free?

D: At home?

A: Yes.

D: I listen to music.

A: Do you play any sports?

D: No.

A: What do you think about your new life? Do you try to adjust to the new life or don't you have to?

D: Yes, I have to.

A: What do you mean?

D: I will live here forever. I will have to adjust to the life and try to learn more English.

A: What do you plan to do in the future? Do you have any idea? What would you like to become in the future?

D: I don't have any idea about my future.

A: What would you like to do?

D: I would say I would like to be a mechanic.

A: Engineer?

D: Yes, but I don't think I could do that.

A: Why not?

D: Because everything is so hard for me.

A: How is your schoolwork? Do you study hard?

D: Not too hard.

A: You don't like school?

D: Yes, I like it, but I need a job because I have to make some money for my father in China.

A: Why?

D: My father doesn't have a good life in China.

A: Where is he living in China?

D: Mainland China, the Communist part of China.

A: Why did he escape to that? Has he any relatives there?

D: Yes, his uncle is there.

A: He can't come out anymore?

D: No, we try to teach him to come here but . . .

A: It's hard.

D: Yes, we just try to take him.

A: Are you looking for a job?

D: Yes, I am looking for a job.

A: For the summer?

D: For the summer, maybe forever.

A: Do you want to quit school?

D: Yes.

A: Why? Don't you like it or do you just want to . . .

D: Make money.

A: To send and try to bring your father here?

D: Yes.

A: Looking back, what do you think you would like to see happen in your country, in Vietnam?

D: I just wish the war would stop.

A: It's stopped now.

D: But I mean . . .

A: Do you mean the Communism?

D: Just become republic.

A: You want your country to become free?

D: Free, like before.

A: What do you think about people in your country? I mean you stayed there for a long time before you came here and when you escaped, some people couldn't escape. What did you think about the rest of the people? What would you like to see happen with them? In addition to your country becoming free, do you want people to have freedom like you have here?

D: Yes.

A: That's what you want to say?

D: You just said what I wanted to say.

A: Do you have anything you want to say about war, about your life here or anything to add that I didn't ask?

D: No.

A: Thank you. I wish you a lot of luck in this country.

END OF INTERVIEW