

Name of Interviewer: Mason Lerner

Method of Recording Interview: Digital audio

Language of Interview: English

Location of the Interview: University of Texas Campus, PCL Library, 1 University Station
C1200Austin, Texas

Date: September 24, 2008

Themes: Experience as a youth in Vietnam/Experience during US conflict

Name of Person Interviewed (or pseudonym): Quan Tong

Contact Information of Person Interviewed: [5902 Little Creek Trl, (512) 441-1266]

<u>Name</u>	<u>Transcript</u>
Mason	What year were you born?
Mr. Tong	I was born in Hanoi.
Mason	In what year?
Mr. Tong	1934.
Mason	Did you grow up in Hanoi?
Mr. Tong	No. I went to Namning (China). Catholic school.
Mason	Just so I understand, you were born in Hanoi, but you went to Catholic in Namning?
Mr. Tong	My (unintelligible, broken English)
Mason	(trying to understand broken English) So your teacher worked in Namning?
Nancy	His father.
Mason	Oh....your father worked in Namning.
Mr. Tong	He was doctor in Hanoi. And than after, we moved to Namning.
Mason	How old were you?
Mr. Tong	12 or 13.
Nancy	Here is a picture of him in school.
Mason	This is you?
Mr. Tong	Look like a high school.
Mason	You look like a movie star, man.
Mr. Tong	This is my younger brother (pointing to picture). He died last month...
Mason	Oh, I'm sorry.

Mr. Tong ...in Vietnam.

Mason Oh, your brother was in Vietnam still?

Mr. Tong Yes. He was a specialist (English unintelligible)

Nancy You know, he was a weatherman.

Mason Oh, a meteorologist?

Nancy Yes.

Mason What kind of doctor was your father?

Mr. Tong Medicine. Pharmacy.

Mason Okay...so...

Mr. Tong My mother was a nurse.

Mason A nurse? Like doctor/nurse?

Mr. Tong Yes.

(5:00)

Mason And so, do you remember Hanoi when you were little?

Mr. Tong occupied Yes. I do. After high school, beginning in 1945, the war. The Japanese

 North Vietnam. I (unintelligible English) high school.

Mason So that was when you were in high school?

Mr. Tong Yes.

Mason Lets talk about when you were a little boy in Hanoi.

Mr. Tong I go to school. I ride bicycle. I go to picnic. I like to go to fishing.

Mason When you were little you liked fishing?

Mr. Tong Yes. And I liked the sport. I have good training.

Mason Good training for fishing?

Mr. Tong For marathon. And fishing.

Nancy (in Vietnamese)

Mr. Tong (in Vietnamese)

Nancy He said he liked sport a lot when he was young. So he ran marathon and go
fishing.

Mason When you think about being a little boy, are they happy memories?

Mr. Tong Yes. I think so. I studied a lot. I learned French. I read many medicine book.
(unintelligible) so I never smoke. I never drink alcohol.

Mason Because you learned about medicine?

Mr. Tong Yes.

Mason So you speak Vietnamese...

Mr. Tong Yes.

Mason French?

Mr. Tong Chinese.

Nancy He is fluent in French.

Mason Can you ask him a question for me?

Nancy Sure.

Mason Just ask him when he thinks about being a boy in Vietnam, in Hanoi, does he have
happy memories about his childhood?

Nancy (Asks Mr. Tong in Vietnamese.)

Mr. Tong (Response in Vietnamese)

Nancy He said that because he was born in a family where his father and mother were
educated, they were kind of an upper-class family, so he was very happy, they took
care of him very well, but on the other hand he saw all of the poor people. That they
were suffering. So he had compassion for them.

Mason So his memories are a mix between happiness from being young and pain from seeing
other people suffering.

Nancy Yes.

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy He said that he loved to go to school, but his school was interfered because of the
war. At that time the Japanese came to Vietnam during the World War II, so they
took
the north Vietnam. The French were still there so the Japanese and France fought on
our land, so he couldn't go to school. And at night he liked to read books and there

was no electricity, any sort of thing that he can light up a light. So he bought some fat or peanut oil and put a little stem of...you know...

Mason A wick?

Nancy Wick. Uh-uh. So it was very hard to read at night, but he tried anyways.

Mason So there was no electricity because of the war?

Nancy They knocked out...

Mason the
Okay. But you made it obviously...when the war was over...do you remember when the war ended?

Mr. Tong Yes. 1945. And after (changes to Vietnamese).

Nancy Since 1945 to 1948, during the occupation of the Japanese, like he just described. After that the French came back. But it was a little better because there wasn't as much fighting any more. But all of the people were still in a state of shock. They didn't know what was going on.

(10:00)

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy He said right after that, you know, there was no peace in Vietnam either after the Japanese were gone. The Communists were fighting with the French. He said that it was very difficult because both sides treat you like an enemy. He said if you wore a white shirt with a little red, that means you are bad Vietnamese. That mean they can arrest you, I mean, and have you, I mean, kill you, make you disappear.

Mason Looking back, what are his feelings about the French. How does he feel about the occupation?

Nancy (In Vietnamese)

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy He said that the French occupation in Vietnam had like a colonist regime. So they put a tax on everything. Even the salt that he was using. Everything that belonged to Vietnam, they took it. Life under French occupation was not very good. They were there for greed. Not for the country.

Mason So when the communists began to fight the French, were you confused which side to be with.

Mr. Tong (Unintelligible English, switches to Vietnamese)

Nancy He said that when he was young, in his generation, everyone wanted to stand up to fight with their friends to gain some independence for the country. So but when the communists appeared and they see what they do and read about them, they very confused and they don't want to join with them. That is a very turmoil time. Young people want stand up for their country, but don't want to join the communists.

(15:00)

Mason And so at what point, when Vietnam was divide into the north and the south...

Mr. Tong Yes. (Switches to Vietnamese)

Nancy There was a treaty in 1954 in Geneva that divide Vietnam into two parts, north and south at 17th parallel.

Mason And you decided to go south?

Mr. Tong Yes. One year before because after we have to (switches to Vietnamese)

Nancy 1953 when he was working (switches to Vietnamese, addressing Mr. Tong)

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy Okay. He like a researcher for like political for...

Mr. Tong (Interjects in Vietnamese)

Nancy Study about political and the Vietnamese political party. So he was draft into the army, that's why he moved to the south in 1953. Which means he left the north before the treaty in 1954.

Mason Okay, just to make sure that I understand...you were drafted into the North Vietnamese Army and you went to the south so you wouldn't have to be in the North Vietnamese Army?

Nancy No, at that time, before 1954 there was one Vietnam. So that army that draft him belongs To French. It was a French army. Vietnamese, but they go under French.

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy (Asks Mr. Tong a question in Vietnamese)

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy (In Vietnamese)

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy So that's...he was drafted. He become an officer in the army that belong to France first, but later on, after 1954, they transferred into South Vietnam. But at the time he joined it was French.

Mason Okay, so you did join...where did you go in the south?

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy Saigon.

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy There is an officer academy called in...(switches to Vietnamese)

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy So he was going to that officer South Vietnam army academy called "Tudik" The third...

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy (briefly in Vietnamese) The first class...but he the third. That was a brand new academy from the South Vietnam Army (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). (Switches to Vietnamese.

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy He said that his class was seven hundred forty something, but when he graduate, Only 700 graduated. There he met some very famous general called Nguyen Khan. He did not, but his classmates become generals.

Mason Why were you chosen to be an officer?

Nancy (Translates question)

Mason Like why did they choose you to go to this school?

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy At that time that's a draft. If you are educated, you are drafted to become an officer. If you have no education or whatever you become soldier. That is a must. He have no choice. It's a draft.

(20:00)

Mason Were you happy to be an officer?

Mr. Tong Yes. (Switches to Vietnamese)

Nancy He was very happy because he wanted to fight for the freedom of his country and also not communist. So that is why he join.

Mason At that time, you joined the army to fight for freedom and to fight against communists, Were you optimistic about the future of Vietnam?

Nancy (Translates question)

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy (In Vietnamese)

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy He said that after joining army and become officer, he was selected of one of the very few to be sent to the United States to study. I asked him what kind of skills that he had and said could study things very quick.

Mason So where did you study in the United States?

Mr. Tong In Fort Benning, Georgia

Mason In Fort Bend, Georgia?

Mr. Tong Yes.

Mason And what did you study there? Military tactics?

Mr. Tong Yes, tactics. And after I go back to serve in my army in Vietnam in 1964.

Mason '64?

Mr. Tong Then they send me to Okinawa (unintelligible) for aerial photo. To take...

Mason Aerial photos?

Mr. Tong Yes.

Mason It almost sounds like...well, you joined the army. They sent you to train in the United States

and Okinawa, it almost sounds like they were preparing you because there was a war coming, correct?

Mr. Tong After I come back to Vietnam, I work with the CIA...

Mason Pardon me?

Nancy He work with the CIA.

Mason Oh. Wow.

Mr. Tong I remember Captain (unintelligible)

Nancy (Let him write it down)

Mason Captain Roger?

Mr. Tong Yes. This colonel.

Mason Colonel?

Nancy Yes.

Mason OK, everything...the CIA...the war....that's heavy stuff, and we'll talk about that s lot, but before we talk about that, I have one simple question.

Mr. Tong Mmmhmmm (Affirmatively)

Mason Why did you choose to fight against the communists?

Mr. Tong Because I see...they killed my father.

Mason They killed your father?

Mr. Tong If you look like capitalist (switches to Vietnamese)

Nancy He said that communists killed all the educated people. His father was killed by them. His father-in-law, his mother-in-law were all killed by communist.

(25:00)

Mason So the communists cause you personal pain?

Mr. Tong Yes.

Mason And you felt you were in danger?

Mr. Tong Yes...it looked like...I don't know how to say it...

Mason Mr. Tong, if you're more comfortable in Vietnamese it's no problem.

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy He said the communists when they get the power, they do whatever they want. There was no law for them to respect. They do whatever they want. He didn't think that was a good regime. Communist regime.

Mason And were you close with your father?

Mr. Tong Yes.

Mason And how old were you when they killed him?

Mr. Tong In 1945.

Mason So you were 21?

Mr. Tong Yes.

Mason So that must have changed your whole world.

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy He point out how unreasonable the communist are. He point out
journalist of AP who communist beat him and took his camera away about
three or four days ago.

Mason So that happened now?

Nancy Just three or four days ago.

Mason So that has not changed?

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy And when he came to the US, (The United States government) made him sign an
agreement that promise that he will never return to Vietnam.

Mason Because the communists will hurt you?

Mr. Tong (nods affirmatively)

Mason Now you mentioned the CIA. How did that get started and what was that all about?

Nancy (In Vietnamese)

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy After he got back from Okinawa, he was ordered to work with CIA to help gather
information and news in case US airplane is shot down somewhere. He will come in the
area like under cover and collect all the data and see where the pilot, what happened to
them and such.

Mason Did you enjoy the work?

Mr. Tong Yes. I like it. It was like a mystery.

Mason It was like a mystery?

(Nancy laughs in background)

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy He interview all of the communists that they arrest. So any time they capture an American pilot, they called him. Because that was a very valuable exchange.

Mason So if an American lands...

(30:00)

Mr. Tong If I see the pilot (Switches to Vietnamese)

Nancy He saw the pilots get arrested and walk with their hands like this (puts hands on head) and he see this so people can come.

Mason So he helped the US locate lost pilots? Am I understanding correctly?

Nancy Yes. Yes.

Mason I think most people in America now, and even than, did not think we should be involved in that war. They thought it was a mistake. Were you personally happy that America came to fight and to help South Vietnam

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy (In Vietnamese)

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy He said that, you know, when the communists took over, there was going to be a war. So by helping Vietnam, South Vietnam, fight the communists, he thinks that is a very good thing. He is very happy with the help of America.

Mason So the Vietnam War, 1965-1975, ten years...

Mr. Tong Yes

Mason Were you in the army for ten years?

Mr. Tong Yes.

Mason Were you in Saigon or...

Mr. Tong (Lists a litany of locations, including the 47th Parallel in broken, hard to understand English)

Nancy He list a lot of places. From north to south, he been everywhere collecting all the intelligence information. Wherever they need him, he be there.

Mason So at the end of the war, you were 40 years old...still a young man...

Mr. Tong So I have over 1,000 hours flying. Over 1,000.

Mason Over 1,000 in ten years?

Mr. Tong Yes. (switches to Vietnamese)

Nancy Over 1,000 hours in ten years.

Mason So you were busy? (Nancy laughs)

Mr. Tong Sometimes I no eating because sometimes you know (switches to Vietnamese)

(35:00)

Nancy He said that a lot of times he did not have time to eat, especially when he work with the medic team. Because they were constantly helping people, trying to get the injured and hurt ones. (Switches to Vietnamese).

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy He worked with doctors to help...(interrupted by PA announcement. Mr. Tong interjects In Vietnamese)...he was so exhausted one time he dropped his knife into his feet.

Mason So you sacrificed your personal and family life to help your country?

Nancy (In Vietnamese)

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy He said he joined Boy Scouts when he was really young so he committed himself at an early age to helping people.

Mason At this time was he able to have any personal life?

Nancy (In Vietnamese)

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy He married in 1946. And had 10 children,

Mason Whoa.

Mr. Tong Five of my children are here and five are still in Vietnam.

(40:00)

Mason What happened with the marriage?

Nancy (In Vietnamese)

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy They still together.

Mason When you were in prison in Vietnam, where was your wife?

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy She grow coffee.

Mason In Vietnam?

Nancy Yes, in Vietnam. And she support the children and visit him in jail with food.

Mason And she came with him to America in 1990?

Nancy Yes.

Mr. Tong In '97

Nancy It is amazing when people can stick together even in that kind of situation.

Mason Does it ever amaze him that despite all of the terrible things he has seen from his parents being murdered, to the communists taking over, to going through the war, he has such a romantic beautiful side to his life also?

Nancy (In Vietnamese)

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy He say that because he have faith in god, he Catholic, so he think that god answered his prayers through any circumstances.

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy In Namnin

Mason Lerner
Presentation
Quan Tong (translated by Nancy Bui)

Excerpts

On his time in the army

Nancy At that time that's a draft. If you are educated, you are drafted to become an officer.

If you have no education or whatever you become soldier. That is a must. He have no choice. It's a draft.

(20:00)

Mason Were you happy to be an officer?

Mr. Tong Yes. (Switches to Vietnamese)

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Mason At that time, you joined the army to fight for freedom and to fight against communists, Were you optimistic about the future of Vietnam?

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Youth

Nancy He said that because he was born in a family where his father and mother were educated, they were kind of an upper-class family, so he was very happy, they took care of him very well, but on the other hand he saw all of the poor people. That they were suffering. So he had compassion for them.

Mason So his memories are a mix between happiness from being young and pain from seeing other people suffering.

Nancy Yes.

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy He said that he loved to go to school, but his school was interfered because of the war. At that time the Japanese came to Vietnam during the World War II, so they took the north Vietnam. The French were still there so the Japanese and France fought on our land, so he couldn't go to school. And at night he liked to read books and there was no electricity, any sort of thing that he can light up a light. So he bought some fat or peanut oil and put a little stem of...you know...

Mason A wick?

Nancy Wick. Uh-uh. So it was very hard to read at night, but he tried anyways.

Personal feeling toward communists

Mason Why did you choose to fight against the communists?

Mr. Tong Because I see...they killed my father.

Mason They killed your father?

Mr. Tong If you look like capitalist (switches to Vietnamese)

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His father-in-law, his mother-in-law were all killed by communist.

(25:00)

Mason So the communists cause you personal pain?

Mr. Tong Yes.

On his service during the war

Mr. Tong So I have over 1,000 hours flying. Over 1,000.

Mason Over 1,000 in ten years?

Mr. Tong Yes. (switches to Vietnamese)

Nancy Over 1,000 hours in ten years.

Mason So you were busy? (Nancy laughs)

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Nancy (In Vietnamese)

Mr. Tong (In Vietnamese)

Nancy He said he joined Boy Scouts when he was really young so he committed himself at an early age to helping people.

On why communism was not an acceptable alternative to French rule

Nancy He said that the French occupation in Vietnam had like a colonist regime. So they put a tax on everything. Even the salt that he was using. Everything that belonged to Vietnam, they took it. Life under French occupation was not very good. They were there for greed. Not for the country.

Mason So when the communists began to fight the French, were you confused which side to be with.

Mr. Tong (Unintelligible English, switches to Vietnamese)

Nancy He said that when he was young, in his generation, everyone wanted to stand up to fight with their friends to gain some independence for the country. So but when the communists appeared and they see what they do and read about them, they very confused and they don't want to join with them. That is a very turmoil time. Young people want stand up for their country, but don't want to join the communists.

Summary

“He said that because he was born in a family where his father and mother were educated, they were kind of an upper-class family, so he was very happy. They took care of him very well. But on the other hand, he saw all of the poor people and they were suffering. So he had compassion for them... He said that he loved to go to school, but his school was interferedwith because of the war... He said that when he was young, in his generation, everyone wanted to stand up to fight with their friends to gain some independence for the country. When the communists appeared and they saw what they did and read about them, they very confused. And they don't want to join with them. There was a lot of turmoil at that time. Young people wanted to stand up for their country, but they didn't want to join the communists... So he was drafted. He became an officer in the army that belong to France first, but later on, after 1954, they transferred into South Vietnam... He said that a lot of times he did not have time to eat, especially when he worked with the medical team... He said he joined Boy Scouts when he was really young so he committed himself at an early age to helping people.

I chose these passages from my interview with Mr. Tong because his dedication to helping others is unbelievably authentic and it stands out from his many other admirable qualities. Although he went through so much pain, his main concern seems to have been easing the suffering of others. I chose to correct the grammar in the excerpts because when one figures in the fact that the excerpts are based on a translation, it seems that making the translation as easy to understand as possible without altering the meaning is in everyone's best interest.