TP: Okay today is May 26th, 2015 and this is Theresa Pham here interviewing Mr. Tung Dinh for UC Irvine’s Vietnamese American Oral History Project. And we’re currently at his home in Westminster California. So I’m just going to ask you like really basic questions at first.

TD: Okay, go ahead.

TP: What was and when was the place and time of your birth?

TD: I was born November 28, ’61 in uh Saigon, Vietnam.

TP: Okay and did you grow up there?

TD: Actually I grew up in a small town in Biên Hòa.

TP: Okay.

TD: When I was young in Saigon, but after that family will move—family move to Biên Hòa.

TP: Okay, and what—at what age did you move to Biên Hòa?

TD: Age eleven.

TP: Eleven? Okay. Okay did you live anywhere else in Vietnam or just in like Saigon and Biên Hòa?

TD: Just Saigon and Biên Hòa.

TP: Okay. Do you have any childhood memories you want to talk about? Like any time s where you hung out with your siblings or school memories? Things like that.

TD: For school I have to say that I have a lot of memories with my friends from high school. Special from high school. We study all together from 10th grade to 12th, finish high school.

TP: Did you have like any hobbies back in Vietnam? Like did you enjoy doing something?

TD: My hobbies play ping pong.

TP: Ping Pong! Okay! Were you good at ping pong?

TD: Oh, not really good at but I can play, yeah.

TP: (Laughs) Did you have any traditions back in Vietnam? Like story telling or…?

TD: No.

TP: No? Okay. Did you have any local gatherings and events back in Vietnam? Maybe like celebrations or maybe for like a holiday?

TD: In Vietnam most of my friends they are Catholic, so I always enjoy with them around Christmas and Easter time. Even—I’m, I’m Buddhist but I always enjoy with my friends when they celebrate.

TP: Did you have any Buddhist celebrations then?

TD: Yes!
TP: Okay, what else did you do?

TD: Basically it’s for Buddha’s birthday.

TP: Okay.

TD: We still have camping for summer time with Vietnamese Association of Buddhists in Vietnam. But they really limited not for — look like over here we can go any time, but in Vietnam under the communist control, we have camping but look like not official.

TP: Okay , how did you celebrate Tết?

TD: Oh okay, Tết in Vietnam we make bánh chưng , you know bánh chưng right?

TP: Yeah the green… the green yeah.

TD: Bánh chưng and we make mút đùa . You know mút đùa?

TP: No what’s that?

TD: The one coconut —

TP: Oh like the little slices —looks like ribbons—okay.

TD: Yeah the little slices of coconut

TP : Did you do anything with your family for Têt?

TD: The family we have to, its an old tradition where we have to take care and clean up for bàn thờ ông bà we have to clean up and prepare flowers, food, and pray for ông bà for Buddha pray for c’ai nguyên cho whole family.

TP: Is there any specific meaning to the fruit?

TD: Yeah ah we have a traditional for north Vietnam because all my parents are born in Vietnam so we have bánh chưng and thịt đồng — your parents know that — thịt đồng that means the food they cook after put in the refrigerator it will see one soft first.

TP: Okay.

TD: It’s pretty good. And I joined with with lion dancing — múa lân

TP: Oh lion dancing! Was that part of a Buddhist—

TD: Yeah.

TP: Okay. So it wasn’t just like a Vietnamese tradition thing it was specifically Buddhist?

TD: Yeah .

TP: Okay, did you celebrate birthdays and stuff or…?

TD: Birthdays in Vietnam? No. In that time not popular to celebrate birthdays.

TP: Did you celebrate any anniversaries?

TD: No, in that time I don’t have engage yet, no wedding. Not yet I’m still single.

TP: Okay so now we’ll talk about family. How did your parents meet?

TD: Oh my parents they just, when they , since 1955 — 54. I ’m sorry ’54. In that time end of Vietnamese war so they went from north Vietnam to south Vietnam . They went on the same boat, big boat so they met together and after they came to south Vietnam—so they engaged.

TP: Was it more of an arranged marriage or was it like because they felt—

TD: Yes , they were arranged .

TP: How do they feel about that, do know if they were like , “O kay it’s an arran ged marriage so I don’t want to—” Was it forceful?
TD: No they had just a small but with in family celebrate.

TP: Okay do you have any brothers and sisters?

TD: I have two sisters.

TP: Just two sisters?

TD: Yep just two sisters.

TP: Okay are they older, younger?

TD: Yes, they are older, I'm the youngest.

TP: But you're the oldest boy because you're the only boy.

TD: Yes, yes I am.

TP: Okay, are there any responsibilities being the oldest boy?

TD: In the family you always have to obey with the parents, but at the same time you always have to follow what the sisters say because I'm youngest.

TP: So then I know that because my older brother is the oldest son of the family that there's specific traditions that he has to follow by, like for instance if they go to like đam ma and he has to hold my grandpa’s photo. Is that what you would do too?

TD: Yeah that’s a tradition yeah. Um family — within the family, the oldest looks like in our big family I’m this person they call cha dôi tốn you know what that means cha dôi tòn? It’s the same looks like your older brother. If your grandparents pass so your father — if your father is the oldest and so he have to hold the picture — hold the bac nha — so your brother have to hold it okay? So I was young compared to my cousin, so I was supposed to be the holder because I’m cha dôi tòn. Even if I was young, the y always have to hold the photo, tradition.

TP: Are there any other traditions that like cha dôi tòn has to do?

TD: Uh cha dôi tòn uh even if im young, very powerful with religion.

TP: With religion you said?

TD: (Nods) With my cousins they always have to respect me.

TP: Do you know anything about your family name?

TD: Um, what you talking about family name? My father’s?

TP: Your dad’s side — so Dinh. Yeah, so is there any specific meaning behind it? Is it like royalty or is it like regular?

TD: Just regular yeah not anything special even for my mom’s side.

TP: Do you speak any other languages other than English and Vietnamese?

TD: I was studying English in Vietnam since 1968 when the US army came to Vietnam. At that time my family have a lot of contact with army because they came my house. One of the he teaches — hes a history teacher in the United States but I don’t know at that time I was young. But he wanted to learn Vietnamese culture so he spoke uh French with my parents. At the same time he willing to teach English for whole family and he learned how to use the chopsticks, how to eat Vietnamese food, traditional culture for Vietnam and so at that time I learned a lot of English when I was young. But uh after the American went back to the United States I don’t learn a lot so I lose — I lose the memory.

TP: So with that then how was your education in Vietnam?

TD: I finished high school in Vietnam.

TP: So just high school education?

TD: Yeah.

TP: Were you planning on going to university after that or no?
TD: In that time I don’t have a chance because at that time just I tried to escape Vietnam. Even since I didn’t finish high school, I tried to escape too many times, in total 20 times. So I don’t have a chance to go to university.

TP: Okay, so since you did talk about how you tried to escape 20 times how was that for you?

TD: It’s very hard and all of my family have to save money to give me a chance. Because each time when you go and you don’t succeed, you will lose some money to deposit. Your deposit—most of them they don’t pay 100% back. Sometimes you deposit, if you lose you don’t go, you lose all. Some people they nice, they will return it back but most of them they don’t return it back.

TP: So when did you start trying to escape?


TP: So you were in Vietnam for 4 years after the Fall of Saigon?

TD: Yes, yes.

TP: Do you remember where you were at during the Fall of Saigon or what happened at that time?

TD: Oh April 30th, I was young and all my family went back to Saigon and went to escape through the airport didn’t go through so we saw the Viet Cong come. A lot of Viet Cong coming and they succeed and we lose all.

TP: Were you there in the streets of Saigon when you saw all of that happening in Saigon?

TD: Uh yes.

TP: What did you see? Could you describe that for me?

TD: Yes I see they drive the big tank T-54 on the street with a red flag. And at that time I was young but I still remember.

TP: After, I lived in Saigon so we went back to Biên Hòa.

TP: And that was in the south right?

TD: Yes, about 30 kilometers from Saigon.

TP: And did any North Vietnamese forces come down, was there any discrimination towards you?

TD: Uh, yeah if your family doesn’t have family related with the north they will discrimination with you. Because they say, “Hey you guys are not our part, so you don’t have any benefits”. look like if you want to go study from university, they say, “you not relate with the north people” so they don’t give you more benefits. They don’t give you much chance.

TP: So then during that time were you working at all?

TD: No at that time I’m been study high school but after that I couldn’t find out my job because then I focus on escaping. Even they took me go to the jail twice now. Each of them 18 months.

TP: Do you know where each jail was or were they the same jail?

TD: No, different jail. The first jail nearest the ocean, the one they catch me. After that they transfer me go to the mountains to cut off the big group. And after 18 months they released me.

TP: Oh okay, why did they release you?

TD: I escape.

TP: Yes you escaped.

TD: Yeah they escaped me and they catch me and take me go to jail.

TP: So then during those 4 years when you said you weren’t working and just studying and trying to escape and stuff, what efforts did you make to escape?
TD: Have some people contact with my family or my friends should go escape but I went to jail with them deposit money—not money should be gold in that time it was gold. We processed the deal together, we okay go with them they will let you know what time and how we met them and what the schedule. And we go but a couple times I—it’s almost they catch me. But I’m lucky, I was lucky I escaped, but my friend and somebody else in the same boat at the time they was in jail. One time I was unsuccessful, I had to escape from bun tau. Have two shipments, go around to the ocean, go to another town since from 9 pm until 5 am. A fer I went back my friend’s house, I was so tired so I slept in that time. I get nightmares. I wake up and still scared because I think they will catch me and go to the jail.

TP: And that was when you were on the bun tau—is that what it was called?

TD: Yes, yes.

TP: Was that before you went to jail or after you went to jail?

TD: After I go to the jail. After they took me to go to the jail the first time. Cause I went too many times after the first time. Since after five years, after the first time I went to the jail they catch me one more time another 18 months. E very day they just give you a small bowl: half rice, half corn or what you call let me… I forget. They give you—that’s only a small bowl. For the soup, you can say it’s a soup but it’s not really a soup. Most of them is water and salt, little rau in there and fish.

TP: Okay. So you said that you went to jail twice, once for 18 months, then you were released and then 18 months again.

TD: Second time, really terrible. Because they let you work really heavy and a lot of people they call phảm nhân ở tù together. And one small house with about 100-2 50 people cause it was small—if you not follow their rules they will hit you.

TP: They’ll hit you?

TD: Yeah.

TP: So was it uh a reeducation camp or was it—

TD: No, no not education. At that time it just not education. Education that means you go to jail and they will let you study some educate. This no, this is for jail and you have to do whatever they say.

TP: Did they let people visit you or—

TD: They allow for you visit with family for Sunday if your family wants to visit you they just allow half an hour. Like my family if they want to bring some food for me. They have to wake up early because in that jail area too far from my house and the traffic’s not good. So my family—no my sister, she have to wake up earlier to take a bus or the train, went there and when they come about noon. So they give you a half hour to visit the family, and after that go back to the jail, bring back your food, that’s it.

TP: What kind of food did she bring to you?

TD: Most of them she bring,  bức t k ho and mắm ruốc. You know mắm ruốc?

TP: Yeah ruốc the little stringy, the stringy.

TD: Thịt you can eat right away but mắm ruốc you can leave it long, không có bị htr. And the dry food, most of them dry food.

TP: Do you remember any specific stories about from when you were in the jail?

TD: Yeah, one story is uh, I still remember two stories. O kay first of all they don’t care how old are you, one of the gentleman; he was old at that time. I remember he was about 50—more than 50, and at that time I was young, about 23 or 24 something like that, he hit him too much because he couldn’t do whatever they say for a day. I t look like you have to clean up and he don’t clean up so they hit him from his butt. They hang him up from his two legs and hang down hold up from the hands—and they hit him. One guy leader of them say I will hit you 20 times, and 18 times he can’t hold it and he fell down. Ask can forgive him they say no. Since people under 100 years old I can call you uncle. If you’re younger, chi có mày tao. The low class say like that. So then they keep hanging his legs up and hit again, it gives me nightmares. And the second story one of the guys he get jailed because he stole some stuff and they took him go to jail. He don’t have family, nobody support to him so he get really sick. B ut the communist don’t let he go to any small hospital, let he sit and lay down in the bed or sit in the chair in there but no medicine. Finally, in that night he died.

TP: And was he your friend or was he just some guy that—