

**Vietnamese American Heritage Foundation
&
Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine**

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Interviewer: Nancy Bui/Trieu Giang (TG)

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TG: Sir, could you please tell us your name and place of birth?

NCT: My name is Nguyen Chi Thien. I was born in February 2, 1939, Hanoi, Vietnam.

TG: Was there any other city you had been to other than Hanoi in Vietnam?

NCT: I lived and stayed in Hanoi until 1946. When the war began I took refuge in my ancestral village, Binh Luc in Ha Nam, which was about 70 km from Hanoi. I lived there until 1950 when I returned to Hanoi, a city under French control at the time. I continued with my study when I got back there. In 1957 I moved down to Hai Phong to live. I only stayed at those two places during the time I was in Vietnam.

TG: Sir, so you had spent most of your childhood out in Hai Phong and Hanoi, hadn't you? Do you have any beautiful or memorial souvenir that you could share with us?

NCT: In general, the period I lived in Hanoi was the time of my youth. Hanoi was in the hand of the French, but life was happy to be fair. The material life and foods were adequate. I said this in general, not just using my family's standard. Even the regular folks from the barbers, the cyclo drivers to the street vendors, could live without fear of being hungry. My own family

belonged to the lower middle class, but even so we had a decent life materialistically. I have to admit that the intellectual life was relatively free from constrain. People could write or said whatever they liked, so long as it was not too overtly anti-France. There were a few incidents “annoying to the ears and thorny to the eyes”¹ during the French colonial time deserved to be mentioned. However, they came from individual behavior like those racist French who lived in Vietnam, and were seemingly holding the Vietnamese in contempt for example. Well, the feeling was mutual in such a case, and we did not hold ourselves back neither. It expressed the anti-French sentiment of our youth at the time, for we believed they were there to dominate us! Hence, a city dweller, living in relative freedom with decent education and adequate life like me, would turn to Ho Chi Minh and to the anti-France resistant movement. It was an enormous mistake leading to a wretched life later.

TG: Talking about your larger family. Is there any special connection to the Nguyen Chi family name sine your full name is Nguyen Chi Thien?

NCT: There was nothing special about my own family because my father was only a low level public servant in Bao Dai government. In our ancestral village, my grandfather and his father before him learnt the Nho² and taught it. This region of my home village was known for its classical scholars. The home village of Tam Nguyen Yen Do, Nguyen Khuyen, was only a few kilometers away, as well as that of Tu Xuong. Here was the cultural and literary region with many classical scholars of Nho.

TG: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

¹ Chướng tai gai mắt.

² Chữ Nho.

NCT: There were four of us totally. I have two sisters. One of them had already passed away; the other is very old right now. My older brother was drafted into joining Thu Duc Military School in 1953, in the same class #4 with General Ngo Quang Truong. He lived in the South until 1975; his last rank was lieutenant colonel of Military Intelligent Corp. Of course he was arrested and sent to the concentration camp in the North where he stayed for 13 years until being released in 1988. His family and he went abroad under HO status in March 1993, and they currently live in Herndon city, Virginia.

TG: Sir, so half of your family left for the South and the other half stayed back, or just this older brother of yours?

NCT: Just this older brother of mine, not counting many other relatives. Within my own family there was only him. He was in the military and was in the South at the time. The reason my family decided to stay back was simple enough. My parents were old, near 60 year old in 1954, so they did not want to take on the journey. They reasoned simply that regardless where we lived, we still needed to work to make a living. Our family was neither property owner nor the mandarin class. We were only common folks, so wherever we lived we still had to work. My parents concluded that we may as well remain in the North which turned to be mistake. They did not realize under the communist regime one worked but one did not have enough to eat, and independent individuals were not permitted to work as they would choose to do so. One must work for the government, and even so one still had not enough to eat. One got arrested for the slightest indiscretion. They did not know all that.

TG: Sir, how old were you during the months when the migration from the North to the South took place, after the communists came to power and the Geneva Agreement practically partitioned the country in half? What did you do and what were your thoughts about it?

NCT: I was only 16 year old in 1954 and my knowledge was limited. As I said, I still hold in high regard the Resistance and their winning at Dien Bien Phu which I had a copy of the newspaper to show to all. Yet, the French did not arrest me even though they were still in control because it was a free society. When the newspaper announced the fall of Dien Bien Phu, I was so happy. I was happy at the Viet Minh's victory thinking we had beaten the French. I bought the newspaper and showed it to my friends everywhere. I told you previously it was relatively free back then. No one paid attention to the story. No one bothered looking at it. I, however, was hypnotized by it. My parents made the final decision to stay back because they thought wherever we went we still need to work to feed ourselves.

TG: Could you describe the scenes of your youth when you saw others leaving for the South while you stayed back? Were you still in school at the time? How did they make you felt? Did they have effect on your decision to stay or to leave?

NCT: As I said previously, back then I was still young so I had no right to make the decision. My parents decided it instead. Personally I liked to go because many of my friends had left. I wanted to be with my friends and to see the new land with my own eyes. I heard of Saigon but I had never been there before. I'd like to go and to live somewhere else because I was tired of living in Hanoi and Hai Phong. My parents kept stopping me, and I was too young to leave them, so I stayed back. At the time I had no political awareness. My knowledge about it was almost nil, as well as any understanding about Communism. Therefore, when the government of

Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem had the slogans painted onto the walls explaining clearly about the communists, I read them for fun and didn't pay much attention because of my lack of knowledge and experience. For example, there was this writing that I still remember:

“While husband and wife work diligently providing the labor,

The destitute young children, are they miserable enough to you, Uncle Ho?”³

Or other like,

“Follow Uncle Ngo, gold hangs from the neck.

Follow Uncle Ho, there is only a life of hardship.”⁴

TG: What life was like after the iron curtain had come down, effectively separating the North and the South and ceasing all movement between the two regions? Could you tell us?

NCT: It was about 6 or 7 months after the communists arrived and took control of Hanoi that we were already fed up of this regime. It blatantly violated all human rights by coming into people's homes to search at any time - day or night for example. The police came in to search whenever they suspected of something for whatever reason. My family did not do anything, but that did not prevent them from searching our home and we had to accept it. The French never did that, and we thought they were over bearing already. The second point was all day long we had to listen to the incessant praise to the Party in a manner defying all logic. For example, my family owed it to the Party and to Uncle Ho for the things we had at present. We did not see him granting any special favor to us {laugh} yet we had to repeat it all the time. And the meetings!

³ “Vợ chồng cần vụ dân công, đàn con nheo nhóc khổ không bác Hồ?”

⁴ “Theo bác Ngô vàng đeo đầy cổ, theo bác Hồ thì gian khổ cả đời.”

Under French rule we never had to go to meetings. People never had to organize meetings {laugh} because it was a free society. After Mr. Ho arrived, there were 3 or 4 meetings a week lasting 3 hours long at a time.

TG: What did they talk about in those meetings?

NCT: The meetings were all about propagandas, and the cadres agitated one person to denounce against another. This happened right in the city, not just in any country side. One neighbor denounced another, bringing to light everything by telling about each other's past, only about the past. This man used to work as a waiter, or that woman used to take care of the French's children for example. By pitting one neighbor against another, they would get to know the personal background of each citizen in the city. We were so fed up, so angry and filled with hatred toward this regime already. We were used to be free under the French, even if it was not limitless, but we had certain rights taken for granted. So what was the first thing they did being in town? They arranged a bunch of loud speakers at the street corners. The loud speakers screamed out noises from 5 o'clock in the morning until 11 o'clock at night non-stop, all pointing toward our homes {laugh}. They were the government's speakers. {laugh} The speakers sang out propaganda or praises to Ho Chi Minh and the Party, thus we became disenchanted. It was already too late by the time we realized it. We were in a cage and there was no way out. At the same time, from 1955 to 1956, the Land Reform Policy was carried out ferociously. It was the fifth round and the main one. They killed countless around the out skirt of the city during that time. I lived in Hanoi in that period, so I went to watch these denouncement sessions right around Hanoi for there was no need to go any farther out.

TG: Could you tell us about a denouncement session that you still remember?

NCT: I had seen many. Let me tell you about the one at Thai Ap⁵, a few kilometers away from Hanoi. That day they called for the trial of Mr. Bay Ran. I watched from morning until night before the trial was done as the peasants came up to denounce him one by one. They said the People's Court⁶ decided the sentence, and who were these "people"? They would put a table out in the middle of the field. The people who called themselves trial judges were a bunch of poor peasants. Some of them were even illiterate, neither knowing how to read nor write, yet they judged and prosecuted others. They said the trial would take place at the field, but in reality they had dug up the graves weeks in advance. {laugh} This one particular scholar was an old man around 60 who was tied to a stake all day long under the hot sun. Imagine that!

TG: What was his crime?

NCT: He was accused of being a landowner for owning but a few pieces of farm land. The tenant farmers, including his own son, would come up one by one to denounce against him.

TG: Do you still remember the words they used to accuse him of?

NCT: An example of the son denouncing against his own father was like, "You (Mày) are a profiteer. You exploit the people for this or that. I (Tao), even though being part of the same family, can see your horrendous crimes for what they are. So from now on I (Tao) won't consider you (mày) as my father anymore!" {laugh}

TG: So the son actually addressed his father as a "mày"?

NCT: He called the old man "mày", and the father in return lowered himself to "con" when answering his own child's accusation, "Yes your Honorable, I (Con) am guilty of all crimes."

⁵ Thái Ấp.

⁶ Tòa án nhân dân

{laugh} There were such immoral scenes like those! Or when a wife would denounce against her own husband, the man had to address himself as “con” to his wife. {Trieu Giang: dear Lord} The poor peasants would make up things; they were all lies. Later on with Correction of Errors Policy⁷, they would admit to the fact that those were nothing but lies. Any scholar or any landowner being denounced would have to be guilty of the crime of rape: raping his own daughter-in-law and/or raping the poor farm tenants. It was very methodically done. They would be accused of beating, torturing and/or starving the farmers. I lived in the countryside long enough, and I never heard such thing. Yet they would make that up. Then they took turn to come up to the stage to throw accusations at the prisoner, who had to sit tight or to stand still. They allowed no challenge to the accusations, except the admission of guilt. When all things were finished, they read aloud the execution order. After reading it, they tied him onto a column.

TG: They shot him?

NCT: There were 6 executioners standing only a few feet away from the prisoner. They pulled out their hand guns and shot him in the chest. Then they cut him down, pushed the body into the hole on the ground with no coffin what-so-ever, and buried him just like that. The ground on the grave was flattening down, instead of piling the dirt high into a recognizable grave. Scenarios like that happened everywhere in the North that year. Of all the sessions I had been witness to, even at the village where I took refuge during the war there were not a lot of farm land. Those who were a bit well off already left for the South. The rich and wealthy, they had gone south too. The landowner class in the North was not as rich as their Southern counterpart in reality. Even so, they packed up and left. Those who stayed back had a few, may be 3 or 5 pieces of farm land for which they were accused of the crime being landowner. There were ones who

⁷ Sửa sai.

owned less than 1 hectare; they too were classified as landowners according to the Party's decree penned by Mr. Ho.⁸ The decree would specify a ratio of 5% to 7% of peasants, meaning in a village with about 100 families, there must be 5 to 7 families that were landowners.

TG: Whether it was true or not is not the issue?

NCT: Yes, in order to meet the requirement set by these numbers, they classified people as landowners who, in reality, did not own much land at all. {laugh} According to the communists' documents, the number of those who died in prison or being summarily executed on spot was 172,008 persons. It was genocidal! We all watched in horror. Back then there were a few Vietnamese writers who would say to me, "Do you realize how many people they had killed?" The Correction of Errors phase had already started. I had the chance to meet these writers, such as Mr. Nguyen Binh who lived a few steps away from my own home, or Mr. Nguyen Hong who would stop by Hai Phong once a while. In reality, I had met so many men deemed landowners, who were languishing in the prison, even with the implementation of Correction of Errors after I was arrested. They were not released under Correction of Errors. What it meant was that the communists did not correct the wrongs done to these innocent landowners; they only did it for the party members. Please never forget that. Going hand in hand with Land Reform was Re-organizing of the Party⁹ to purge the Party of party members, who came from either bourgeois or small bourgeois background. These people were recruited for the war efforts, but now became untrustworthy. So in the name of Land Reform, they eliminated those elements, all of whom were actually very patriotic. They arrested some 20,000

⁸ Ho Chi Minh.

⁹ Chính đốn tổ chức.

people, according to their own documents or I would not know. There were about 12,000 left after Correction of Errors.

TG: So what happened to the others?

NCT: The other 8,000 party members were dead already. They shot them all. The 12,000 who were not shot yet, they belong to the village-level or town-level Communist Party branches. They accused them of being agents of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party¹⁰ or Great Viet Party¹¹, and then had them executed summarily. The 12,000 who had not yet been done away was because of the 20th Soviet Communist Party Congress¹² held in February, 1956. In that meeting they criticized Stalin, the killing of the comrades, the unfair trials, the secrecy, and the slandering and killing party members. They condemned them all. Hence, the Vietnamese communists followed suit with Correction of Errors. If not for that 20th Party Congress, where Stalin was condemned for killing fellow communist comrades, there would be no Correction of Errors since Vietnam had to follow Soviet Union in everything. The Party Congress in the Soviet Union took place in February, and Correction of Errors happened in August, 1956, due to pressure from the Soviet. Please remember, they only corrected the mistakes done to other communist party members. When I entered prison I met plenty of the regular folks who were unjustly arrested. I still ran into them until 1970 - 1971, being in prison dozen of years without being released. Many of these landowners did not survive because they were old – the majority of landowners were old. So they were mentally traumatized by the experience of losing all their earthy possession, or being denounced by their children or neighbors – all lies. They just died. Those who survived, whom I later met, would live out the rest of their natural lives in prison. The

¹⁰ Quốc Dân Đảng.

¹¹ Đại Việt hay Đại Việt Quốc Dân Đảng.

¹² Đại Hội Đảng Cộng Sản

communists did not let go of anyone. I had not witnessed one case of a landowner being released while doing my time in prison. That is the truth. To be honest, those of us who stayed back in Hanoi knew these stories very well. We also witnessed the persecution of the Humanity Movement¹³. We witnessed them all.

TG: We would like to ask you about the number 5% - 7%. Where did they come from?

NCT: The Vietnamese communists just followed the Chinese model. The Chinese communists decided the number of their landowners was about 5% to 7%, so the Vietnamese communists just followed suit with the same count.

TG: They went to the countryside hunting enough landowners to match with that number 5% to 7%?

NCT: They must have enough. If a Doi¹⁴ did not come up with the correct numbers of landowners, he was considered not working hard enough and/or not enthusiastic enough. In either case it would be very dangerous to him. When the Doi arrived at a village, they must get their 5%.

TG: Sir, you said previously that about 100,000 or some people were affected during this Land Reform?

NCT: 172,008.

TG: Yes, and you also mentioned the 20,000 party members. This number was included in the other 172,008, wasn't it?

¹³ Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm.

¹⁴ Đội. (Translator: Thành viên của Đội Cải Cách Ruộng Đất)

NCT: Yes, it was included in that number.

TG: So when these cadres were pardoned through Correction of Errors, did they get released or they....

NCT: They were let go. Some of them even got reinstated back to their previous official positions.

TG: The peasants and common folks did not get released.

NCT: There were probably a tiny number of them being released in my opinion. I don't know for sure. I did not see a pardon in my village or in the surrounding ones, and none during my time in prison. However, I guess they must let go of a small insignificant numbers of them.

TG: In the many ways they put people to death, by shooting for example, there were allegations that they would bury these people in the ground with only the heads and necks sticking out. And then they would run a plow through, thus cutting off the necks. Did you ever witness this act?

NCT: I did not witness it myself. Therefore, when I saw the movie *We Want to Live*¹⁵ showing the scene where they ran the plow on top of the two human heads, I did not believe it. While I myself was the one who witnessed many, I did not believe it. I only saw executions by shooting. Before they shot them, they would torture these people by beating them up or hanging them upside down. They tortured them to get information about their possession because they suspected these landowners of hiding gold or silver somewhere else. Many died or killed themselves during these torture sessions because they could not bear it. While the entire family of the accused landowner was isolated, many young children had starved to death because they

¹⁵ Chúng Tôi Muốn Sống.

forbid anyone to bring food to them. So people would secretly feed them just a tiny bit. Some time the entire family would succumb to starvation. They were not count in that 172,008 number because they were children or the elderly, not the landowner him/herself. That uncounted number itself was also very large. We also need to know that these landowners, who died later in the prisons, were truly patriotic and helped the Resistance a lot, a fact was conveniently forgotten by the communists. These people had helped the Resistance in indescribable ways. I remember between 1946 and 1950 when I was in the countryside, soldiers - sometime an entire battalion or a company would pass through my village or the surrounding ones. Hundreds of them would stay on the property of the landowners. Even those who were not landowners, but had some means, would let the soldiers in on their small plots of land. The poor peasants only had a tent {laugh}, so where could the soldiers stay? Thus, they all stayed with the landowners, who may not be very wealthy, but they could at least feed and gave shelter. The entire class of landowners had shouldered this responsibility, and yet the communists destroyed them all later.

TG: Sir, what had happened next after causing such social chaos through their Land Reform Policy?

NCT: After Land Reform finished, there was the Humanity Movement at the end of 1956. At that time, they were trying to correct the terrible consequences of the Land Reform Policy, and then Humanity Movement happened. However, things were not simply happened, there must be opportunity and the time was right. In the Soviet Union, they were criticizing Stalin and condemning the dictatorship of a single political Party at the moment. Thus, Humanity Movement in Vietnam was born in that period. At the same time the Humanity Magazine¹⁶

¹⁶ Tờ Nhân Văn.

appeared, there was a Hundred Blooming Flowers Movement¹⁷ in China. Freedom of speech was encouraged. Unfortunately, it was a trap set by Mao Zedong to punish those who dared speaking up. We Vietnamese did not know that. Those Vietnamese writers thought it was the opportunity to ask for some freedom to write, and not much else. When they spoke up, they became the target of official persecution. They didn't expect it because the entire group of Humanity Movement was Communist Party's supporters. They all praised the Party; none would oppose it. Please remember it for me, no one in the group would oppose the Party. So what did they want? They wanted to be free to do whatever artists and writers did best. They wanted a bit of freedom from official interference forcing them to write this or that.

TG: Sir, could you elaborate on how official interference was done on the writers back then? Could you explain more?

NCT: I could give an example of how the writers had no freedom in writing. If he/she described love, the kind of love between a man and a woman, they would say such story was for the bourgeois class. Love must embody class characteristic; it must have struggle. They wanted it to be written in that manner. If love was just plain love, it was not acceptable to them. If there was pain and suffering in the love story, like a real story where the author told of his inner most emotions upon hearing the news of his wife's passing away, they would condemn it as being pessimistic. Revolutionary culture must always be positive. Therefore, poem like "The Purple Color of Myrtle"¹⁸ which had no political tone to it other than a cry for one's wife would be censored. {laugh} They would forbid its circulation. If one's cry for one's wife was enough to be black listed, then what kind of writing one could do? How could he keep the emotions inside

¹⁷ Trăm Hoa Đua Nở.

¹⁸ Màu Tím Hoa Sim.

him when his wife was drowned? Yet, they forbid its circulation, along with other well known songs. The song “The Troop Comes Home”¹⁹ with verses like, “Lovers with red handkerchiefs soaked in tears. Wait for the tomorrow’s victory and we’ll dream together.” That was unacceptable too. Romantic verses would negatively affect fighting spirit. They still loudly praised the Party and the Universal World²⁰, but the verses talking about waiting for the victory and dreaming together deemed too romantic. Censored! That’s how they intruded themselves upon every aspects of life. The artists and writers felt they were too tightly confined, so they asked for a little bit of freedom from any political meddling. For example, there were people who wanted to modernize poetic verses. They did not want to follow the forms of traditional rhythms. They wanted to modify and to modernize just a tiny bit. Forbidden! The communists reasoned that the workers and the peasants, the target groups, would understand neither complex nor abstract expressions. So, forbidden again! In all, everything must serve the political end and the goal of the Party. The artists and the writers only asked a bit of freedom. They only wanted to write, not to oppose anything.

TG: Could you tell us how many people were there in the Humanity Movement? What did they do and how were they persecuted?

NCT: When they were persecuted (sound of sneezing), only a few of them actually went to prison. They had not committed any real crime so the communists accused them of being slanderous. For examples, Mr. Nguyen Huu Dang, Ms. Thuy An, Mr. Tran Thieu Bao, Mr. Phan Tai, Mr. Le Nguyen Chi, Mr. Phung Cung etc...etc... all went to prison for dozen of years while committing no crime at all. Others, including Professor Tran Duc Thao and Professor Nguyen

¹⁹ Đoàn Quân Về.

²⁰ Thế Giới Đại Đồng.

Manh Tuong, would be sent to do forced labor - taking care of cows {laugh} in the mountainous area. They had plenty of cows up in the mountain regions.

TG: Were the cows the property of the commune²¹?

NCT: They all belong to the commune. They sent these people to take care of the cows and the pigs, and to dig holes. The communists forced these tasks on them for years before they were allowed back.

TG: how did it affect the writers' spirit then?

NCT: Terrified. Yet, neither being fearful nor kowtowing to the communists for the permission to write again would do any good. When they were released years later to live they among the common people, all of their former perks were taken away. Living like common people was very miserable.

TG: What kind of “perks” you talk about here?

NCT: For example, a writer in the Writer Association²² had better allowance than one for a common person. Take me for an example, every month I would have 100 grams of meat or 100 grams of fat, and the same amount for sugar. My rice ration was about 10 kilograms, mixed in with a few kilograms of “bo bo”²³, and a few kilograms of jam or cassava. However, the writers would have better allowance at 15 to 16 kilograms. The meat ration could be between 500 to 600 grams {laugh}, not much more than us. In addition, their ration included Chinese tea and cigarettes: 10 boxes of cigarettes, or 2-3 bags of Chinese tea per month. Moreover, they also

²¹ Hợp tác xã.

²² Hội Nhà Văn.

²³ Job's Tears

received some royalty from their writing, besides the salary, so their living standard was better than me, not much but better. {laugh}

TG: Sir, talking about these is almost incomprehensible in this society. Here we work and earn our money, and we buy whatever we want to buy. People actually invite one to purchase their products. Could you elaborate on how a person had lived in a regime where the government controlled everything?

NCT: They had a system called Stamps and Notes²⁴ which was under the control of the government. Take me for an example, I was allowed 10 kilogram of rice a month, and I needed to purchase them using the given official Stamps and Notes. Without them, I could not buy the rice, except going to the black market where it was sold 10 times more expensive and thus, beyond my reach. I'd give another example. The salary of a working person was about 40 Dongs a month. 10 kilograms of rice from a government's store cost only 4 Dongs, leaving me 36 Dongs for other things. If I purchased rice from the black market at 4 Dongs a kilogram, I would have 10 kilograms of rice with no money left. Hence, there was an expression once, "Being sad like losing one's rice booklet"²⁵

TG: So that the younger generation and others can understand more clearly. Over here, one goes to work and earns one's salary depending on one's capability. If one has money, people will approach inviting him/her to spend the money by begging or lower the price even. To find a job was difficult enough back then. Even with the hard earned money, one still needed to deal with the Stamps and Notes system, without which one couldn't purchase goods at lower prices.

²⁴ Hệ thống tem phiếu.

²⁵ Buồn như mất sổ gạo.

If one had to purchase them from the black market, one couldn't survive on the meager amount of foods his/her salary could buy.

NCT: Impossible to meet the need. The salary would just be enough for the rice. 10 kilograms of rice was not adequate because there was no meat or fish. A young man must consume about 30 kilograms, not 10 kilograms. {laugh} A farm worker needed 30 kilograms. Yet, even so they had 3 separate places with 3 separate ranks where people were allowed to shop at. There was a rank for the people and cadres; they had their own different types of Stamps and Notes. Middle ranking officials could buy more from their own shops. High ranking officials, from the heads of departments to the members of the Politburo, had a special store called Ton Dang where they could buy all the expensive or imported goods. Those VIPs could buy freely from Gạo Tám Thom²⁶ to plump chicken. {laugh} They had everything, and they could buy anything. Ton Dang was the name of the place where these VIPs shopped. Back then people would say, "Ton Dang is the market for the King and the mandarins. Van Ho is the market for the loyalists, the liars, and the flatterers." That was the middle ranking cadres. "The side walk is the market reserved the people." {laugh} The people got to shop at the cheapest place.

TG: They said Communism brought justice to all, but in reality, the markets alone catered to three distinct classes.

NCT: Three entirely different classes. Those high ranking men were living very successful under communist regime. They worked according to their ability and they consumed whatever they needed. Whether they were capable or not, who cares? But they enjoyed whatever they wanted. I take example from those men belong to the Politburo. They enjoyed everything rare

²⁶ Fragrant rice.

and beautiful in this life. There was nothing in the world that they did not have because the entire country served their needs. The wealth of a country was also their wealth, so they lived royally.

TG: How many percent of the population could live like that?

NCT: Not much. I want to be fair by saying those who lived that standard was about 30 families. Only those belong to the Politburo could afford such lifestyle. Those merely in the Central Bureau Party²⁷ would have to content themselves with Ton Dang - the market for the King and the mandarins. They couldn't live grand and large like the few others. Those in the Politburo were like the sons of Heaven. That's the reason they called it the time of the Saints and Deities.²⁸ They were like the Saints and the Deities, and anyone dared crossing them would be punishable by death.{laugh}

TG: So the story about Ho Chi Minh living a simple life was untruthful?

NCT: That was a baloney, make-believe kind of story. He never lacked any thing. I want to emphasize that he did not miss out on anything, even medicines. They had already brought to Vietnam the made-in-USA drugs that even the French did not have. Everything were catered to the need of Central Party. The people had nothing at all; for them, it was difficult enough just to buy aspirin. I mean those incredulous things like that. Advance machines and medications, rare and luxurious items the French had, but not the American, they already had them in Vietnam. Stuffs the American had, but the French did not, Hanoi already had.

²⁷ Trung Ương Đảng.

²⁸ Thời của Thánh Thần.

TG: Let's come back to the Humanity Movement. How did it end and what kind of influence it had on people, especially on the intelligentsia?

NCT: Well, the persecution made the intelligentsia completely cower in fear! {laugh} Do you understand that? Asking for a little bit of freedom was enough a reason for the Humanity Movement to be crushed to death even though those involved still followed the Party and praised it. Not only one's life was adversely affected, but also one's children and grand children in the way access to schools and jobs became much more difficult to obtain. That's enough to terrify the entire class of intelligentsia. There would be no asking or demanding except absolute obedience. After that incident, the artists and the intelligentsia kowtowed to the Party in total fear. There was no need to threaten them with imprisonment; the lightest penalty would be sending them to "live among the common people"²⁹. Life of the common people was so miserable, and these educated men did not have the physical strength to do manual labor. The fear was total and absolute! Mr. Nguyen Tuan said before his passing away, "I still survive to this day because I fear," and he was their favorite one. It was the kind of fear for no reason at all. For example, the writer Nguyen Khai was fearful all the time even though he was a colonel in the army. One day while listening to To Huu talking, he smiled a little bit. The man next to him turned and asked, "Why do you smile, comrade?" He fearfully answered, "I did not smile. I had buck-teeth, which made it look I was smiling while I did not." {laugh} The fear was that intense! What could the artists and the writers do when they were that scared? In 1956, there was a writer named Manh Phu Tu, aka Co Dam, who passed away. Someone accused Mr. Nguyen Hong, the writer Nguyen Hong, of not being there at the funeral. Mr. Nguyen Hong was so scared, he said, "Yes, I did go to the funeral. I stood next to the coffin and Mr. This and Mr.

²⁹ Về sống với nhân dân.

That would be my witnesses.” The reply was published on the newspaper {laugh} to clear one’s name right away, otherwise one may be really guilty. You see how repressive they were.

Human spirit was buried and no one was spared.

TG: Sir, is there any writer from that era who is still alive, or they have all passed away?

NCT: The majority of them have passed away in general. I will give example of how one lost one’s spirit. There were giant writers in Humanity Movement such as Mr. Tran Dan, Mr. Le Dat, and Mr. Hoang Cam who spent their lives more miserable than the animals for 30 years long. When they had their Renovation³⁰ and untied the chains a little bit, these men should speak up, don’t you think so? They should speak up in demanding restitution for their loss and restoration of their honor, shouldn’t they? They did no such thing. They spoke up to praise the Party and Uncle Ho instead. Mr. Tran Duc Hao, a philosopher, did just that. He was so scared that when they untied him, let him enjoy a little bit, and gave him some money – I must say so – to print books, he immediately sang, after 30 years, the praises to Ho Chi Minh and the Party. At the time people cursed, in hinting, that these men should had done something or spoke up when they reappeared in the society after 30 miserable years. These men had commanded the respect of the public up to that point. Yet, they did a complete turn-around by extolling the regime instead. That how low their spirit were. The government persecuted them to the point that in 1956, during the Humanity Movement, they denounced each other pathetically. They soiled themselves with all the dirt by shamefully admitting to their guilt. People in the South didn’t know about that. They were published on books and newspapers so we knew. Mr. Tran Dan accused whatever. Mr. Hoang Cam and Mr Le Dat admitted to their guilt by saying, “I am covetous of fame and fortune. I am poisoned by the capitalists. I am ungrateful. The Party has

³⁰ Đổi mới.

nourished and protected me. Yet I turned around using my pen to slander the Party this or that.” They admitted their guilt in this manner. They themselves wrote these contemptible words which were printed in the books later. I did not recall them from my head. There you see, that tells how miserable it really was. Therefore, an intellectual living under the Communist regime, in all sincerity, was nothing but a lowest of the slaves.

TG: Sir, do you think its echo or its influence is still felt to this day so that the entire Vietnamese society is condemned to live in such wretched state? People have spoken up nowadays, but they still not play the role in the saying, “Even the common man should feel the responsibility in whether his country is in ascendant or in failing.”³¹ Do you feel the same?

NCT: The Humanity Movement has no effect on what is going on today because none of the men involved is the role model.

TG: I meant to say they were made an example of, and other people fear suffering the same fate.

NCT: Nowadays people are not that fearful any more. To be fair, the nature of the regime itself has changed and it is no longer closed up like it was years ago. In addition, Communism had met its demise too. Right now only fools, whom the communist leaders are not, would believe in Marxism and Leninism or the utopia of Communism. {laugh} They are more concerned with making money and accumulating wealth to live grander and larger than the capitalists themselves. However, the Vietnamese have been thoroughly terrorized by the regime after so many years, and it is still going on even though it is not as heavy handed to be fair. Back then, Ho Chi Minh and the Politburo designed the Assemble for Reeducation Purpose³² Order and rubber-stamped by Congress in June, 1961. Assemble for Reeducation Purpose order, in

³¹ Quốc gia hưng vong thất phu hữu trách.

³² Tập Trung Cải Tạo.

essence, gave the police the whole sale authority to arrest without the need for trial. There was no need for interrogation.

TG: No court trial?

NCT: Yes, there was no trial because there was no court system. Under Assemble for Reeducation, they could arrest anyone who was deemed a risk to the regime without the need for trial. The standard length of prison time was 3 years per “order”³³ back then. One “order” was equivalent to 3 years. With that Order, police came to arrest a person at his home and transported him directly to the camps in the jungles for hard labor without any trial. There was no need for interrogation because the person was truly not guilty of any crime except being considered “dangerous” elements by the regime. Countless thousands of people had been arrested this way. They (the police) were the terrorists who terrorized the entire society. They would arrest thousands at a time. I could say there were a time they arrested a mass of hundreds of thousands people. Every family would have one loved one in prison somewhere. The time Ho Chi Minh was in power, the regime inflicted such terror on the mass that people were cowered in fear. Nowadays, they are not that heavy-handed, but they do have their own ways of suppression those who oppose them, don’t they? Even when the pressure has lightened up comparing to yesteryears, one can still be arrested and be imprisoned in miserable conditions. The regime targets selective individual protestors instead of terrorizing the entire mass of people. Back then, they had no hesitation in cracking down on the loyal and dedicated cadres who worshipped Ho Chi Minh and did their best to support the Party. They arrested indiscriminately. For example, that man lived in the office. He saw his superior behaved in a manner unbearable. He may noticed the secretary’s small embezzlement so he decided to speak up,{laugh}

³³ Lệnh

“Comrade, you have made a mistake such and such.” After a few times, the secretary would note it down that this man had reactionary thoughts. That was enough to send him to prison, {laugh} so he would be arrested and no trial needed. I had witnessed so many Party loyalists being sent to prison. This category was numerous, so I had said one could still be sent to prison even if one worshipped the Party and followed the Party’s orders with zeal. Criticizing and self-criticizing were encouraged by the regime. Yet if one criticized his superiors, they would maliciously write that on his personal file and reported it to the polices to make hell out of one’s life³⁴.{laugh} Back then it was like that, nowadays they are not that bad even the suppression is still there. There are only a few who dare speaking up in a population of 80 millions inside Vietnam, aren’t there? The slight increase in the number is still in the hundreds who publicly demand this or that. What does it mean? It means the people are still very fearful, doesn’t it? Very fearful, indeed! During the French Colonial time, the entire population of Vietnam was about 20 millions in the North, the Central, and the South. The years before 1945, the population passed 20 millions a bit already. Yet, at the time the persecution was not as heavy-handed, and the number of individuals leaving their families to join the Resistance by becoming members of the Communist Party, the Vietnamese Nationalist Party or the Greater Vietnamese Nationalist Party ...etc...etc...were above 10,000 in number. Right now, there are only about 100 of those who dare raising their voices in a population of 80 millions. How much weaker they are now comparing with their predecessors! All because the regime has successfully terrorized them into submission and has crushed the spirit of the entire nation. My old friends do nothing, despite the dozen of years they spent in prison after being wrongfully accused. They came home at the same time with me around 1978 – 1979, decades ago. Yet, they have remained silence since, and have

³⁴ Đời ra nước.

lived their days in waiting for death to come. None of them would raise his voice in protest for the years being locked away in prison. Their spirit is gone. What I want to say is the absence of the will to fight back, the sense of righteousness, and the conviction to speak up for justice.

They are all gone!

TG: Sir, let's return to your life. Could you tell us why you were sent to prison?

NCT: The reason was simple enough – being ignorant. Being ignorant of Communism led me to prison. At the end of 1960, I went down to Hai Phong, where there was a school called Dan Lap³⁵ with about 30 to 40 students near my home and right across from my door. Dan Lap was an adult school for the cadres, and I knew a friend teaching there. One day my friend was sick so he asked me to substitute in for him, and I had agreed to it because of our friendship. I went over to the school and it happened to be the History period - It was about World War Two. I taught them according to what I knew, instead of according to the school text book. I told them the Japanese surrendered after the two nuclear bombs being dropped down on their two cities. Otherwise, they would fight to the end even if they were destroyed completely at the end. They had name for it called Broken Pearl³⁶ describing a Japan like a pearl, broken into pieces. A broken pearl was better than a whole tile³⁷. If not for the two atomic bombs Japan would never surrender. However, it was wrong of me to say so because the official book did not teach that. The school book taught that the Soviet Red Army defeated the Japanese Kwantung Army³⁸ in Manchuria, causing Japan to surrender, not because of the two atomic bombs. I was ignorance of what the school book taught, so I taught according to what I knew. They arrested me for the

³⁵ Dân Lập.

³⁶ Hòn Ngọc Vỡ.

³⁷ Ngọc vỡ hơn ngói lành.

³⁸ Đội quân Quang Đông.

crime of spreading propaganda against the Party. They accused me of that crime. I had no idea for if I knew I would never teach such thing or even accepted to be a substitute teacher in the first place. I thought I was telling the truth about history. It was just my ignorance. How could I know better, being a young man of twenty some years old at the time? I thought political activities would involve throwing propaganda leaflets, forming party this and that, or writing on newspapers for example. How could one be a political activist otherwise? Who could know sharing small talks over cups of hot tea and talking indiscreetly would be considered being political? {laugh} Indeed, talking over cups of tea would result in a very long prison stay {laugh} if they heard about it. Many people did not know that. Because of their simple mindedness, countless ended up in the prison. I belong to that category the first time I was arrested. That time they sent me away for three and a half years. During those three and a half years, I wrote poems just like I had done before.

TG: How old were you then?

NCT: At that time I was slightly older than 22 years old. I entered the prison in 1961, and I already composed poems by then, but not with an overtly opposing tone. I mentioned about the daily scenes in the society, but nothing compared to the horror in the prison. There, human was less than a beast. I did not exaggerate when I said human was not treated as nicely as a beast - a water buffalo or a cow. Not measuring up to them by a long distance! For example, a dying person would passed out and cough up blood. Calling for emergency help was not answered, so the person just died. In contrary, a water buffalo or a cow started getting sick, they would hurriedly feed them with sugar drink or soybean {laugh}, and injected it with Penicillin. They did emergency treatment on a pig or a cow right away, didn't they? If that was a human being, it was not their concern. Humans were fed less than a beast. There were situations when some

prisoners walking by a pot of bran for pigs, without a cup they would use a bamboo pipe to scoop up some bran to eat furtively. Do you realize that had they been caught, they would be beaten to death? These prisoners ate the pigs' bran; they were less than the animal itself. The way they treated humans was too horrible! Everyone was like walking skeletons. And dying! Everyday someone would die. So I made up my mind to use my poems to note down the entire phenomenon that had not been seen in the history of the Vietnamese up to that point. I must do it with that goal in my mind. It would be better if I could write that in prose which allowing more details. However, where would I find papers and pens to write on, not to mention that they would check the cell all the time? It was dangerous writing prose even out there in the society! Where would one hide it? As I said before, they could enter one's home day or night checking for whatever they wanted. Thus, I wanted to write poems instead, and to transcribe everything I saw to share with everyone. The goal was to send them to the South so they knew what Communism was like. They must know so they would have the strength to fight. I wanted them to understand; it was difficult to understand without having to live with the communists. I was let go after spending one and a half years in prison, and then they arrested me again.

TG: For what reason?

NCT: No reason other than writing poems this time around. What would young men of twenty five or twenty six years old do among friends if not reading poems? One read to one's friends, who shared the same grievances, because one could not lock up such thoughts in one's head. We read to each other and if the listeners like the writing, they would in turn tell others. That's how it spread out. Finally they suspected me to be the author because I already had written more than 100 poems during the first stint in prison.

TG: Did you memorize them in your head or wrote them down?

NCT: All in my head. I would not dare copy them down fearing they would be found them if the polices would search my home. I could lose my life if they did that and found my writing! Therefore, when words reaching their ears through the conversations among my friends, they suspected the culprit was me and promptly had me arrested again. They interrogated and read to me some poems being in circulation between Hai Phong and Hanoi. I denied them all. Even so they could put me in jail, and threw the key away without any need for trial as permitted under the Assemble for Reeducation Purpose Order. It was at the beginning of 1966 and I was imprisoned until 1977, two years after they won the war in the South. While I was in jail this time, both of my parents passed away without seeing me. I wrote about 400 poems when I was released the second time. I tried to find a way into the British Embassy to ask for help in spiriting the manuscripts out of the country. When China attacked in the North in 1979, I was afraid that they would re-arrest me because they made me reporting to the local police station and the police department all the time. I feared if China continued on with the war they would arrest me, under the pretext of Assemble for Reeducation Purpose to safe guard the rear. Hence, I thought of sending my writing overseas because I worry I would not survive another sting in prison. My health had deteriorated. I decided to enter the British Embassy on July 16, 1979.

TG: Did you jump the fence or walked in?

NCT: I just walked in. There was one gate with only one police standing guard who did not check nor search anyone. I strolled up to the gate which located on the sidewalk, and walked right through. I gave the note book containing my poems to the employees working at the British Embassy, and when I exited the Embassy they would immediately arrested me. This time

they sent me away for 12 years and 3 and a half months, and they did not release me until 1991 after the demise of the Soviet Union. Had Soviet Union not failed, they would never let me go! I was released on October 28, 1991. Soviet Union disintegrated in August 19 of the same year. {laugh} They also released Mr. Doan Quoc Si, Mr. Vo Dai Ton, even Duong Thu Huong. Soviet Union had gone so they released the dissidents. The 400 poems I wrote in prison were a record all the anger and the pain that I had.

TG: So where did those poem published at, in “Flowers from Hell”?³⁹

NCT: They were published outside in 1980 while I was still in prison - all 400 of them.

TG: Going through the British Embassy?

NCT: Through the British Embassy.

TG: Did they send them to somewhere else later?

NCT: They sent my writing to Professor Honey in London to look over. Mr. Honey taught Vietnamese Literature whose Vietnamese was excellent. He was in charge of Asia and Africa. After he looked through he gave the manuscripts to Mr. Do Van at the BBC. Then Mr. Do Van gave it to Mr Chu Kim Ngan to print in the USA with the titles, “The Echo from the Bottom of the Abyss”⁴⁰ and “The Final Words of a Prison” ...etc...etc...but the name of the author was not my real name. I learnt about the publishing of the manuscripts while I was still prison as they showed it to me. I recognized my work immediately and only then I would admit to it being mine.

³⁹ Hoa Địa ngục.

⁴⁰ Tiếng Vọng Từ Đáy Vực.

TG: They showed it you in the prison?

NCT: It was like this. They folded the book like this {noise of paper being folded} so that the title was hidden from view. I saw a letter I wrote in French. “Is this your hand writing?” they asked. I was happy, so happy, because I had been waiting for 15 months long from July 1979 to October 1980. I guessed it would take 6 months to print it and did not realize it was actually 15 months by the time they showed it to me. Can you image how longing I was for it? Finally, I was so happy I admitted it was my work right way. It was truly mine. How could I deny my own handwriting and with them knowing everything? I was not supposed to be released if not for the demise of Soviet Union which led to the change around the world. They had said it to my face, “Keep writing poems and the God of the Under World⁴¹ will be your publisher.” They also said, “Feel free to continue.” However, there is a God at the end, isn’t? God saved me with the demise of Soviet Union, and the death of Socialism which forced them to form diplomatic tie with China, to normalizing diplomatic relationship with the USA, and to be included in Most Favored Nations⁴² list...etc...They were forced to released the dissidents and let me come over here.

TG: Sir, how did you come over here?

NCT: I flew over here. Initially I left under the ODP status. I have a brother who was in prison for 13 years and came to the USA in 1993. He did the sponsoring papers work for me. In truth, he did not have the right to do that, but the USA Embassy told him to go ahead. They would let me go even my brother started the paper work since 1993. By the time Bill Clinton became US President and normalized the relationship with them, I already gave up hope because they had

⁴¹ Diêm Vương.

⁴² Tối Huệ Quốc.

denied me once before. All the sudden they called me in to grant me a Visa. I travelled to Saigon to fly over here. Once I was in Saigon, they changed my status from ODP to HO, so that was my status when I arrived here in November 11, 1995. It was 15 years ago.

TG: After living for so long in prison in a miserable society you just described, what was your first thought stepping down on America's soil?

NCT: To tell you the truth, I did not feel and excitement. When I was young, I had dreams of travelling to places, to see San Francisco, and many other places. Yet as I came to the USA, I felt old and tired. What was my goal to come here in the first place? I was happy in knowing I would finish a few small tasks. For example, I still had 300 poems, done in the 3rd sting in prison that lasted 12 years, which that I wanted to publish. I could not do in it in Vietnam unlike nowadays I could send them off instantly using the computer. {laugh} I came here to get my 300 poems published. Secondly, I want to write about the prison, Hoa Lo, which I had done. I could not do it when I was in Vietnam with them spying and bothering me every day. So I came here. So I am happy to be able to accomplish some tasks. However, there is one thing I had planned to do but now my health has failed me.

TG: What is it?

NCT: I wanted to write a memoir of my life, but my mind is tired from all the thinking. I planned it about 100 pages long, focusing on the events from the moment the communists came back to Hanoi in 1954 until the day I left for America. Perhaps about 300 pages but I can't write any more. My health is not good. It's the only thing I haven't done.

TG: We don't know when you will be able to do that, but taking this occasion, could you tell us briefly the things you want to write about in your memoir, so the youngsters can understand the heart of a man who had witnessed so many changes to our nation and our people?

NCT: The truth is that I only want to tell about my private life, about my naivety, my ignorance of politics, and the mistake in believing in the communists - meaning choosing to stay back with them. I'd like to tell about the tricks, the intrigues, and the persecutions committed by the communists. I'd like to tell about their policies regarding human life and how they treated person worse than a beast to be straight. I want to describe in details the meaning of being buried alive, regardless whether one was outside or in the prison. I want to describe it as it was: a hell on earth, without any exaggeration for the purpose of bad mouthing them. I had planned to do all that, but unable to so far. I really want to do it. That's the current situation.

TG: Sir, since you came over here you had participated in many activities. You had appeared at many places, gave many talks, publish books and poems, and get involved in numerous activities relating to our community. What is your observation of the Vietnamese community outside of Vietnam? How would you answer to the rumor that you are a "faked" Nguyen Chi Thien, especially?

NCT: I would be surprised if they did nothing. In the contrary, if they try to hurt my reputation, just like they have done to many others, I am not surprised at all. We have to remember there are many communists living overseas, but I will not say all those who try to harm my reputation are communists. Nonetheless, I can see their hands in the process, and those thoughtless nationalists who have followed them because of some unknown motivations. They are the same ones who cause troubles to the Venereal Thich Quang Do, Father Ly, Ms Le Thi Cong Nhan, Mr. Nguyen

Dan Que, or against the political activists who are fighting for democracy inside Vietnam at present. They are against me and all others, so it is very clear to us that there is Hanoi's hand in all this. However, I am not confused to the point to call all of them communists' lackeys. No, some of them are nationalists, but they are ignorant and thoughtless. They have jumped on the wagon because they like to write and criticize others - any other persons. They are not all communists. However, the main thing is that there is Hanoi's hand in all this. That's certain.

TG: Sir, there are many who complain that whoever wants to do something good, he/she would face certain malicious behaviors - less on constructive criticism and more on malicious disruption. It is not healthy. Do you have any thought about it?

NCT: This is my opinion. This is a free society so it is the way it is. [.....] I have been to many places and meet many people; I know many of our people living overseas are very kind. The majority of them know who are not right and who lies. They know it all. So, one should not feel discouraged because of them. Lately I haven't gone out a lot because my health is not so good, not because I feel discouraged. They can curse me because it's their job. They have started it already even when I had not arrived on the USA yet. When I came here, they just continue. There are men who think of themselves as nationalists, yet they criticize me in an incomprehensible manner. For example, I came to the USA on the 11th of November. They would raise the question, "why did you come here right on the date of President Diem's death?" {laugh} That date was the date of the President⁴³'s assassination; it must be the conspiracy between the CIA and the communists to bring me here. It is an example of their nonsensical critics. Who is going to believe them? In my opinion, those who really work for something, they are not worried about being criticized. Has not Mr. Obama being criticized right

⁴³ Ngô Đình Diệm.

now? Mr. Bush was also criticized heavily, didn't he? How can we avoid it living in a free society? Fortunately, they are only a minority. The majority of our people are very kind in my view. They understand and they have their own knowledge for which they are not easily fooled. So I live with that majority, and do the thing I have to do. What more can I wish for? Since the days of my youth, I didn't wish to be involved in politics. I also have no desire to come back to Vietnam to beg for an important position. It is not so. I am close to the end of my life right now; I only hope to help those men, who are still in Vietnam to keep up their courageous struggle, whenever I can in spirit or by material to join my voice with theirs in spreading their messages outside. I am concerned with how to get the world to intervene to help them and their families when they are arrested to keep the movement inside Vietnam going. I'd like to encourage the communists who had awakened because these men are not like us. Mr. Tran Do isn't like me. He had followed the Party his whole life, so when he lifted his voice to demand democracy and protested against the current regime, we have to support him. Support him eagerly if anything! That activity is to help our nation to become democratized faster, so that the people could have more freedom and a government truly voted in by the people themselves. I only hope that much and nothing else. In order to have that, each of us needs to contribute in. Do not think an individual is not important. Many individuals together will become a force, won't it? Inside of Vietnam or outside, we do to the best of our effort, however tiny, for the effort of democratizing our nation. Let's not forget one thing: millions of tiny effort will become a huge one, won't it?

TG: Sir, there is a question for you, a Northern intellectual, as you finally came to the US. What is your thought on the American foreign policy in the Vietnam War?

NCT: To be honest, I think the American made mistakes from the beginning. We who lived in the North could see it very clearly how impatience American were in the fight with the

communists. America wasn't involved in a long war, wasn't it? It was only 2-3 years when Mr. Eisenhower became a presidential candidate who promised the public that he would bring peace in hope to win over the voters, wasn't it? {laugh} They fought only 3 years from 1950 to 1953, and he ran for the presidency in 1952. Wherever they fought, they could not stomach a long war. The fight in Vietnam, which lasted from 1965 until 1973 - about 8 years, was too long. The casualty was high, almost 60 thousands, not counting the wounded, and the enormous cost of material. The communists knew that; they knew the characters of the French and the American. In capitalist country generally the people lived prosperously, they didn't have the persistence or the will to bear the hardship for a long time. Knowing that the communists did say they would continue to fight in 10, 20 years or even longer. {laugh} They did say that because they knew it was the weakness of the capitalists. Ho Chi Minh would say, "We only need to kill one of you for every 10 of us that you killed, and it is enough to make us win." America lost about 59 thousand lives, and the public screamed with protest. North Vietnamese died in the millions, yet the entire country remained mum. In Truong Son, there are about 300,000 dead bodies lost somewhere in the jungles which they didn't even let the families know. Yet, people are still quiet, aren't they? America fought with an enemy like that, not mentioning all the help from the brotherly Socialist nations such as the 300,000 Chinese stationed in North Vietnam, and then Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Cuba, and North Korea. I lived in the North so I knew. They wanted to fight to the end, regardless the number of casualty. Ho Chi Minh had said, "Fight to the end even if we need to burn down the Truong Son." Le Duan would keep on fighting even there was only a boxer left. {laugh} How could American match that kind of will to fight? They felt discouraged, and they tried to figure out a way to pull their soldiers out. That was a wrong way of fighting a war. How could the communists continue fighting on for so

long? The decision to continue the war was made by the Politburo, a group of a dozen some men. Neither the people nor Central Party had any say in it. I lived with them so I understand their mentality. Just like you and me sitting here, in this air-conditioned room in Summer and heated in the Winter, tea to drink, food to eat, helpers to assist around while others had to fight, you and I can talk tough, right? 10 or 20 years of fighting is no problem because neither your family and you nor I are affected by it. It was the same for them. They still stayed at their places with nothing threaten them, so they are determined to fight it to the end. The American should have brought the war to the North, so that they had to evacuate up on the mountains to live in caves. Firstly, they were older. Secondly, they had been used to the taste of luxury. The combination of these two may motivate them to go for true peace. Without bringing the war to them, they would fight on forever waiting for America to pull out itself. With no help from America, it is natural that South Vietnam would lose to them at the end. It was so obvious. That's where the American got it wrong. To push the war northward, the American worried about the possibility of Chinese intervention in which Mao Zedong would send his Chinese army to recreate a second North Korea War. In my opinion, even if Chinese actually intervened in when fighting was brought to the North, the communists would be scared, just like in the civil war between North and South Korea when North Korea almost lost out. So, bringing the fight to the North would threaten their seats and made them seeking real peace. Would the Chinese intervene? I had seen, by living in the North, that since 1966 the Chinese did not intervene in any more. Why so? The Great Cultural Revolution in China caused too much chaotic that even Mao Zedong called it so. Dang Tieu Binh, Chu An Lai, and then Banh Chan, Luru Thieu Ky were all imprisoned. They were killing each other. Twenty millions people died in the Great Cultural Revolution lasting from 1966 until 1976; China was in chaos when Mao Zedong passed

away. At the time, if the American would organize the ARVN for an attack to the North, the people, who were thoroughly disgusted with the communists up to their eyeballs, would just turn from the communists and joined the Southern forces. Wherever they went, they would have the support of the people who were starving and were full of anger. The situation in the North would become unstable then. Hence, neither a clear victory nor territorial occupation was needed because the communist regime must sign a treaty of peace for their own survival. They would respect this treaty because it was a near death experience for them. Their leadership position was threatened directly. Therefore, to have peace and to keep the South, they must fight that way.

TG: What was the atmosphere of the prison was like the day the communists hoisted their victorious flag up in the South?

NCT: In general, we did not wait until the final victorious day. We were already felt so disappointed listening to the news of the South's retreating army. We were all young men in the prison and we had no love for this regime. It was a sentiment shared by people of the North back then. We looked southward and put our hope there. Then all the suddenly, the South started losing so fast causing us feeling not only disappointed in the imminent final communist victory, but also anger at the incompetence of the Southern leadership. They lost the war in only a few dozen days. What's a shame! At least they needed to keep it going on for a few years until there was a change in the world politics. They lost it in only a few dozen days of fighting. No, they did not fight actually. So we hated them. We talked among ourselves, with the kind of life they had had, they did not care to defense for it. Now the communists were victorious, there was no way of making a living. So I penned the line, "...when the Party came, everything was broken." I said it very clearly.

TG: So the demise of the South brought not only misery to the South but also the North?

NCT: I believed the North felt the pain more acutely because the South did not experience Communism yet at that point. They only understood it after living for awhile under regime. When they arrived, there were people coming to greet them; there were ones who would even feel happy! Intellectuals like Nguyen Hien Le would congratulate them, Mr. A Nam Tran Tuan Khai would be happy, and others as well. Only after staying with them for a time, they started hating them. We Northerners would worry days and nights about the advancing of the Northern Army. If the South lost the war, the people of the South would suffer, everything would be broken, and we would not know when we could get back our country. Under this regime, even the water buffalo or the horse would not find peace. The wild dogs had consolidated their power. Even if we wanted to pretend ourselves as water buffalo or horse, they would not let us be. Thus, I had questioned, "When could we take back our country?" I did ask that.

TG: Sir, your question brings us toward near the end. What do you think about our youths living in Vietnam and overseas? Would they be the ones who bring democracy back to Vietnam?

NCT: A democratic Vietnam, minus the one Party dictatorship and the communists, is something that will happen eventually because it is the unstoppable trend of history. The only real concern is how long will it take for it to happen? If it takes too long, then our nation keeps sinking and swimming in misery. How fast it will happen all depends on the circumstances and the history. I feel disappointed at the youth living inside of Vietnam nowadays. They don't care much about the country; they are more concerned with something else, in all truth. I live overseas for 15 years by now, and I have questioned many people visiting from Vietnam. They

told me the youth thought of nothing. Those with money would only care about indulging themselves. Those without money would worry about making money, building their careers, but not about their country. That's the truth they told me. Eighty million people with only a few on the "informat" (?). What good is that? The youngsters living overseas are sadly the same. If they don't know Vietnamese, they won't care about Vietnam. They speak Vietnamese not well; they can't read Vietnamese. Asking them about Tran Hung Dao or the two Trung sisters, they have no idea. How could they love Vietnam? They are becoming Americanized. I come to visit them, the children of my friends; they think nothing of Vietnam and Communism. There are a small, very small, number who still think of Vietnam and understand about Vietnam. However, that number is too small which causes me no less a feeling of disappointment. In my opinion, just for those living overseas, let's teach our children to speak Vietnamese well. Well being not only the ability to speak a few conversational lines at home, but the ability to read Vietnamese books. Only when they can read Vietnamese books, they will understand the culture, thus will develop the love for Vietnam. If one doesn't know one's mother tongue, he/she can't love the language or the country. That's the highest responsibility that we must do, even Communism is no longer there. In a democratic country, those who live overseas should try to keep their children from losing their cultural identity. A twenty five years old young woman who can't speak Vietnamese and who converses solely in English, by the time her children grow up, they would lose their root entirely. That's the danger, and the biggest responsibility for the youngsters is to learn Vietnamese fluently first. Inside of Vietnam, they need to take back the Right to Speech to themselves. With the internet connection nowadays, things are better. There are people who are interested and the regime can't stop them on the internet. They read the posted information here and there, and I must admit, they've come to understand many things.

Yet, there is still the limit. Many people have access to the internet and out of 100 persons, we are lucky to have a few who actually pay attention to politics. They rather pay attention to other things on the internet. That is the reality of those who live in Vietnam. We must have Freedom of Speech, and when we do – this we have to demand it ourselves for they won't grant it to us – it is dangerous. The communists lie to live. All dictatorship live by lying; they all afraid of the voice. Thus, we must get the voice: the freedom to write newspapers, to write pamphlets, to publish newspapers ... If one is arrested, another will replace him. When it all happens at once and everywhere, there will be no more persecution, right? There is no chance for persecution. Just like in the Soviet Union when Gorbachev started opening up and everywhere newspapers were born, thus the door could not be closed again. People formed clubs not just in here and there, but everywhere in the Soviet Union. There must be unity and a campaign in order to wake up the people's hearts, so the young people can see the crimes the communists have done to the nation since the day the Party was formed in 1930 until now. Only then, the people will have the strength to get rid of them, replacing them with a democratic society. Most important is the communists who have had the change of heart. They will be the agents of change from inside. If I came back, no one in Vietnam would listen to me; the party members who are in the military would not listen to me and they would call me a reactionary. But if Mr. Tran Do or Mr. Hoang Minh Chinh spoke up, they would listen. The generals, the colonels, and the old party members are their upper rank, they would listen because they couldn't call them reactionaries. They spent their whole lives for the Revolution, and now they have denounced the regime. They can't be wrong. Therefore, the communists who have awoken are those who would fight from inside. This is so very important to cause change in the ranks of the police, the military, and the Party. Only then the regime would be destroyed. What is our responsibility overseas? Supporting the

people inside Vietnam fighting for democracy, especially the communists who have awoken even if they are not like us. There are many so-called intellectuals living overseas who have made poor judgments. They criticized anyone's writing that not entirely pleasing them. They criticized them directly, and it was a mistake, big mistake. In contrary, we need to support them; we don't need them to be like us. How could they be like us, they who had spent their entire lives believing in the Party? From the days they were young, their minds were poisoned. Yet now they spoke up to demand democracy, multi-parties political system, and freedom. What else can one demand from them? This is the important point that I try to convey to people wherever I go. To those who criticize indiscriminately, everyone is a double agent⁴⁴, Mr. Tran Do was one, same as Mr. Hoang Minh Chinh. There are also special agents including Bui Tin, Vu Thu Hien, Nguyen Minh Can, and even me. They knew nothing; they just said it indiscriminately.

TG: Sir, for the last question, what would you wish for in the last days of your life?

NCT: I have no other wish. I am telling the truth; it is as much as a private as it is public. My friends, who are living in Vietnam, had been in prison with me so they are very close to me. I miss them a lot after 15 years living abroad. I have my sister and her children whom I would very much wish to see again. However, I won't come back as long as Communism is there. There is a reason for that. Why should I bring my face back there so that they would make me reporting to the police station every day, forbidding me to go here or there, and educating me one more time, right? I hate looking at their flag. Thus, there must be Freedom of Speech in Vietnam. That must be the first step. If that happened with 1 or 2 private newspapers, I would come back right away to stay inside Vietnam and to give talk everywhere with the Freedom of

⁴⁴ Cò mồi.

Speech already there. I would write to contribute in real substance the process of democratization of Vietnam. That is the public part. The private one is the fact that my friends are very old now, in their 70s or 80s. They are dying off one by one without seeing each other. Those still alive are succumbed to illness. They called me and I called them. They said I need to come back to Vietnam to meet up with them. I miss them all, and I want to come back, very much so. But there is no way. Therefore, I wish fervently, my last wish, and nothing more. Nowadays I can't eat a lot, meaning my strength is failing me. I only wish this country will get better and the people will get better. To be under the communists' rule is disastrous. To the point they can't even build a bicycle without buying the parts from somewhere. Or even the screws need to be purchased. It descends down too low! Not just me but also those who live in Vietnam question the wisdom of talking about building satellite when we can't even produce a screw?! It is so illogical. {laugh} Nowadays the country is broken and the educational system is degraded, thanks to the communists; to rebuild it would take a very long time. So the faster it comes, the better it is. That is my public wish. I also have a private wish to see my old friends and family again in the last days of my life. That is it and there is no other goal. This wish is not only mine, but it is also those of Mr. Bui Tin, Mr. Vu Thu Hien, Mr. Nguyen Minh Can. They all have the same wish. They are in their 80s and they want no other things.

TG: Thank you very much, Sir. In the name of VAHF, I would like to say thank you for spending your time to talk to us about your hopes, as well as the experiences you had gone through, so that the younger generation will understand more. I hope this will be a lesson for them and for the country.

NCT: I am grateful to answer your many questions. I also hope that the younger generation would understand the truth about the history of Vietnam so they can be aware of the reality in Vietnam in the present.

TG: Thank you, Sir.