Richard Verrone: This Richard Verrone and I’m continuing my oral history interview with Ambassador Nguyen Phong. Today is June 19, 2003. We are again in the Special Collections Library interview room and its 9:25 AM Central Standard Time. Sir, we left off with, basically in the late 1990s. You were working for these, basically pro bono for these companies bringing international business into the country and at some point you leave Vietnam and you go to New York, let’s talk about that transition, what happened?

Nguyen Xuan Phong: Well, in the early ‘90s I try to bring back those foreign corporations because of the promulgation of the foreign investment law in 1988 and 1989 there was a big interest from the foreign corporations to go to Vietnam, it was the opening up thanks to that foreign investment law and it was also the opportunity for Nguyen Ca That, who was at that time the foreign minister and deputy prime minister and so on, member of the Politburo to advance the reason that I could be of some assistance to him on his trip to Paris to get the French companies back to Vietnam. So that was the reason why by the end of, in December 1988 I was granted a passport and allowed to go to France, that was also the opportunity for me to take care of a number of family matters pending there for the last, for the previous fourteen, fifteen years. And so that was the beginning of an effort to bring back those foreign corporations and may have already mentioned I was able to bring back Reneau, the car manufacturer, France and then also
various other French companies in packaging, in construction and particularly in the
garment, textiles visitors and I was able to negotiate the corporation contract with the
Phong Fu Textile company, state owned completely just outside Saigon for that French
and Swedish company which were the second largest garment manufacturer for industrial
clothes in Europe. So it went very well because they prospered, than managed to get
about two thousand workers in that unit producing industrial clothes, that is work clothes,
but very high class, for Air France for all those very big companies. So that was the
period and that was also the beginning of a big boom for Vietnam economically, so they
were able to attract lots of people and companies coming back to Vietnam for business,
so I tried to do that. But for various reasons, mainly security reasons I made it clear that I
would help them without any charge or fees because I thought that once people, and
especially from various quarters that they knew I was making money out of those
business deals I would be in trouble so mainly they paid for the fares to go back and forth
and travel and so and so forth.

RV: Did the Vietnamese government pay you?

NXP: No, the foreign because the Vietnamese didn’t have anything to pay me
with at that time.

RV: Right. How did you make your living, did you have your money from your
savings from the schools?

NXP: No, from not at all. I still continue with the family and in the family the
youngsters there and other relatives, we had odd jobs, I continue with some translation
work, textbooks and the youngsters there manages always to get some odd jobs in
deliveries and even working in the barber shop and have present shop, they did some
garment repairs and things and we were able to manage.

RV: If I may ask, you made, I think you made a lot of money in the ‘80s with
your English as a second language schools, teaching English.

NXP: Relatively speaking, that is to say I was able to earn about fifty dollars a
month, you know that’s a lot of money because its about five, ten times compared to the
monthly salaries of the civil servants but the money we made after paying all the
expenses and costs to run those evening courses, then about seventy percent of the
income that we get from the tuition fees were completely redistributed to the teachers and
we had about three hundred teachers and we were able to share about fifty dollars per head per month but that required me to teach ten to twelve hours a day, that is to say besides the official hours in the evening courses, I also had a private tutors mainly to the young Chinese buy sand girls who were very eager with their families to go to Taiwan and Hong Kong and they paid well and so it amounted to about fifty dollars a month which were more than sufficient for me to take care of my old parents at that time but by then 1990 and ’91, my parents passed away so I became much more, shall we say freer in those economic projects.

RV: So how did you end up stopping in the late ‘90s with the foreign companies and then transitioning out of Vietnam?

NXP: I did not stop. I continued to help them and eventually I was able to bring in for example Lockheed aircraft but mainly to see a project to build a new airport for Ho Cho Minh City, ex-Saigon and also we had a look at the No Bai Airport in Hanoi, but No Bai Airport in Hanoi had at that time about half a million passengers a day and in Saigon it was about one million to 1.5 million a year, so it was not viable financially.

RV: A day, you mean.

NXP: No, a year, a year and No Bai was about half a million a year too. So strict minimum for any kind of international airport to survive would about three to five million and it was not possible. But Lockheed also had an interest on Phu Quoc so for diverting there but I also was able to bring back Honda Bank, that is a Swiss company, although it is called a bank but it was the number one cement manufacturer in the whole world and we started that Morning Star cement brand in Vietnam before then, in Qian Jen, that is where they get the clinker and then bring back to Saigon to process it.

RV: How long did you work doing this, how long?

NXP: Mainly you know each of those projects takes me anything between a year and two to work out the negotiations and the feasibility studies because I was mainly concerned with the, involved with the feasibility studies. It was an opportunity for me to understand people from outside and inside Vietnam and particularly the people in Vietnam at that time did not have any idea how to carry out business with the foreign companies and I worked very closely at that time with Colonel Gen who was the vice chairman of the State Commission for Investing and whom I knew before, during the
Paris Peace Talks and who was then eventually the head of the Hanoi commission in the, what do you call it the formation of the National Commission for Supervision and Control, as mentioned in the Paris Agreement. And so it was also the beginning of the opening up of Vietnam and the rapprochement with the west and of course eventually you have to deal with United States, that was the problem of Nguyen Ca That at that time and he discussed with me many times how to proceed with the establishment of relations between Vietnam and the United States and that cause his downfall of course because he was considered too pro-American although he advocated kind of a balance you know between the communists and the free world and concretely at that time with the collapse of the Soviet Union it was concretely the problem between Beijing and Washington, even then he lost his job. But then he was much freer in our discussions and we tried to resolve basically the concrete problems at that time the opening up. So that was the big boom at that time, but they started so low that any you know small improvement would be a big boom, from not even two hundred GDP per capita they would be able to move up, move up to three hundred, that was big boom.

RV: It's a start.

NXP: Yes, it's a start but the investment came in very forcefully with the FDI, that is foreign direct investment. At that time Vietnam was able to attract anything near six billion U.S. dollars a year.

RV: Six million?

NXP: Six billion, you see and of course it was much more than the Vietnamese economy could absorb but that was the big thrust from the foreign companies and then after the big boom it would slow down.

RV: What happened in the late ‘90s for you, what did you do?

NXP: Well, I went through the whole thing and with Nguyen Ca That out of power I became much more careful because the security people were watching me much more than before but I continued. But then you know when the financial crisis of the region came in 1997 then it was you know big problems for Vietnam, although Vietnam was not drawn into that regional financial crisis because they were not convertible but they suffered because all their partners of the region then had big problems with their mother companies and withdrew their investment or stopped their investment and so on.
And so that was the beginning of the weakening and investment which were about six billion a year dropped to about a billion and then even less you see by the end of the ‘90s.

RV: Let’s take a quick break; let me change this disk out please. Thanks.

RV: Okay, let’s continue. So after the economic crisis what did you do?

NXP: Yes, so by the end of the 1990s things became very difficult but I think that the United Nations specialized agencies and many of the foreign governments continued to give helping hand to the Vietnamese economy and they managed to sustain the growth probably between anything five to ten percent a year of GDP growth, ideal growth and they managed to continue until now at that rate. But there are also lots of changes happening inside the country. That is for example the collapse, the continued collapse of the agricultural prices in the world market make it very difficult for Vietnam because Vietnam traditionally was eighty percent rural in its population. So they tried to hold the lien but it has become more and more difficult now, even right now so.

RV: What happened to you?

NXP: Well, at that case my activities with the foreign corporations decreased a lot and then I was much more with the family, with the other have to sell handicraft I call it, activities.

RV: What did you do?

NXP: So I continued very much with the translation of books and then had also private tuitions for again those Chinese because they paid better.

RV: Tutoring private individuals?

NXP: For whole families would come to groups, big groups to my home or at their homes.

RV: How much would you charge?

NXP: For a cost of one class because we had the practice of having a class at each grade level for three months and so they paid me at that time a piece of tile of gold, no, no, one tenth of the tile gold, they called it a chi.

RV: A chi?

NXP: Chi, C-H-I, that’s one tenth of a tile, a tile is a little bit more than an ounce, it is about thirty-seven grams instead of the thirty grams of the ounce. And that was better you know compared to the other salaries and then I continued like that.
RV: Okay, and you eventually left the country?

NXP: Yes, and then you see that is by 1989, ’88 or ’7 even I was able to renew contact.

RV: ’87 or ’97?

NXP: ’87, ’87?

RV: ’97.

NXP: ‘87, I was able to renew contact with an old friend by the name of Harold Schommer in New York and then he came to Saigon to see me, you know visit me.

RV: Are you talking late 1980s or late 1990s?

NXP: Late 1980s and then it was from the contacts that I was able to renew with those old friends that by the late 1990s they suggested that they would invite me to New York to be with them. So that group is also very special to me because I have known them for nearly forty years.

RV: What’s the name of the group?

NXP: This is the ICIS, the International Center for Integrated Studies, Integrative Studies in New York, it was established in 1962 by a Swedish humanist, I can’t remember the name and since then it has been an NGO affiliated with the United Nations and they are non-profit, welfare, education, social organization. Harold Schommer was also a very exceptional person because I met him for the first time in 1965 or something and then he was also in Saigon and then he was also in Paris as the representative of the National Council of Churches of American and also of the International World Committee Organizations in Geneva. So Harold Schommer was also assistant reporter with Eleanor Roosevelt in 1947 to draft the human rights charter of the United Nations and that was why in 1995 at the fiftieth anniversary United Nations he was the key speaker at the United Nations on human rights which he drafted the charter in 1947 or something. And he was at the Paris Peace Talks throughout from Harriman to the end with Kissinger, the signing of the Paris Agreement, the position of the National Council of Churches at that time for the Vietnam conflict that we should have a cessation of hostilities and that all parties would turn off the taps, stop all the weapons and army and trying to find political solution but they were very inclined to, I would say they very well craft platform of more Kennedy and so on afterwards, that is easy to compose with the
Vietcong if necessary and that was the position of Harold Schommer. And Phil Habib used to say, “Phong, it’s a very bad thing that we make Harold Schommer run in all directions for nothing” but anyway Harold Schommer came to Saigon to visit me after trying very hard for many years to find out what happened to me. And so that was in 1999 when they suggest that invitation to go to New York and also they asked me for years to write something about hope because they are very interested in setting up a science of hope in their studies and I somehow reluctantly started to write that book *Hope and Vanquished Reality*, which they published, you know invited me to New York and I arrived in New York then to in the late 2000 and worked with them there on humanitarian things and so on.

RV: So you left permanently or did you, or just to go?

NXP: No, I was just. I got a visitors visa. It was very rapidly given to me by the consulate general of the United States in Ho Chi Minh City, twenty-four hours and so my wife and I, we got the thing.

RV: You’d gotten remarried in Saigon.

NXP: Oh, yes.

RV: Okay, let’s talk about that.

NXP: In ’92.

RV: How did that happen?

NXP: Well, very unexpectedly, things seem happen to me unexpectedly to me you know all the time. And so Rhoda was with my parents before I came out of prison because her family and my family were very close for years and when my parents were there, were most destitute for themselves, she, her family continued to take care of my old parents and then her mother passed away 1979 while the father, a special Air Force, a Special Forces colonel all his life were in re-education in North Vietnam, he had almost nine or ten years of re-education and he was still there. And so Rhoda was left with five or six younger brothers and sisters to take care of. They did not have much money of course. Their father was a Special Forces colonel fighting all the time, mostly in the jungle in the Highlands, not living room officer at all and when I came back only about a couple of weeks after the death of her mother she was left there. But then the two families seemed to merge together and she then stood by my side all the time, since my return in
1980 and after the death of my parents in '90 and '91 it became a bit awkward for us to
be together all the time as in the past when my parents were still alive there for more than
ten years you see and it was a rather moving moment, she took care of the burials with
me of my father and my mother and so on and we were left there, two orphans with
nobody around and 1992, no that is to day, more than a year after the death of my mother
she said to me one day. “Phong, do you think that we can get married?” because she
knew very well that my former wife in Paris divorced me already in 1988. And she said,
“it’s very difficult I know for you to think of such a thing you see, because we belong to
different generations and so on and so forth.”

RV: How much younger was she, is she?
NXP: Twenty-four years, two zodiac as in Vietnamese because we also had a
zodiac of twelve animals. And I explained to her, it was very difficult to conceive such a
thing but she said to me, “What matters most is the feelings you see” and she said, “I
know that also is difficult for you to have these feelings but could you pretend?” So
when I heard that and considering that she stood by my side for more than ten years, take
care of my parents on our own and we didn’t have anybody left around us any more, I
said, “Well then in that case let’s do it. I don’t have to pretend” and so that’s how we got
married on the 22nd of December 1992 in, with a big crowd in the presence of brother
enemies, generals from the north and generals from the south and all my uncles and aunts
and so on. And so we have been together for more than twenty years now in fact, so
that’s for Rhoda.

RV: Okay, so the two of you went to New York together.
NXP: So we went to New York together and we stayed there for a while and also
very unexpectedly that I discovered Lubbock in April, the year 2002.

RV: So how long did you stay in New York, you went in the fall of 2000?
NXP: More than a year and then afterwards I went to Orlando, Florida for a while
because it was too expensive to be in New York. We brought along enough money to be
in New York. We thought we had one year, twelve months U.S. visa as a visitor,
multiple entry and so on and put all together with our credit cards and cash and so on we
brought with us nearly forty thousand U.S. dollars and then it cost a lot to live in New
York, even the rent alone is about eighty percent of what you could afford and then
eventually when I came down to about one third of what we’d brought along we’d thought we’d be much better to survive on a cheaper basis and we knew a few people, Vietnamese families in Orlando so we went.

RV: Did you get your visa extended?

NXP: Oh, yes because I continued to work with ICIS and I shuttled to New York quite often but it was agreed that they couldn’t afford to have me up there too and I could not afford by myself up there so that was the arrangement and eventually I was, I became aware that the Vietnam Center here and every unexpectedly I came.

RV: How did that happen?

NXP: I cane, Dr. James Reckner was in contact with the old friends in New York and found out about me and asked me to participate in that symposium. But one of the reasons which prompted me to come to Lubbock was also to see Douglas Pike.

RV: Douglas Pike.

NXP: Who I knew since 1960 in Saigon when he was with the USIS in Saigon, the U.S. Information Service there. So I was, I was able to see him in April when I came here for the symposium.

RV: April 2002.

NXP: 2002 and as you know just one month later he passed away. Then I came back for the memorial service and it was at that time that Dr. Reckner informed me that he would be willing to take me at the Vietnam Center, so that was a very sudden you know event happening. We did not think to remain in United States for long to begin with and also to join the Vietnam Center in Lubbock, the name of which I did not know even a few months. But then I must say I’m very grateful for the opportunity to be at the Vietnam Center, discover what it is doing and I hope that I can be of some usefulness here and particularly I have to express profound appreciation to Dr. James Reckner and Dr. Diane Oliver and also I must mention Jim Nesbit who take care of all the INS papers for me.

RV: Right, because you applied now for.

NXP: So officially the Office of the International Affairs of TTU its that that university has submitted an application for me to remain in the United States as a permanent resident and I must also express my appreciation too that because of applying
for that permanent resident status I got lots of help from all kinds of people, former U.S. ambassadors whom I knew during the Vietnam War period and particularly General Alexander Haig and Ambassador John Negroponte who is now the U.S. ambassador at the United Nations, they personally intervened for that application and I am still waiting for that application to go through. In principle it seems that the approval has been granted but the INS is being reorganized right now so temporarily slow down this activity.

RV: What about Vietnam, what about going back or, how could you decide to stay and live in the United States now versus going back to your homeland?

NXP: Well I very much like to be able to go back to Vietnam of course and also to be useful in United States much more than I could be in Vietnam considering my past there but my participation at the symposium you know last April 2002 did create you know some problems at home.

RV: What kind of problems?

NXP: Because I was a bit anti-communist I think during that symposium and I was considered at that time by the Hanoi authorities to be a kind of reactionary and you know a threat to the regime and so and so forth. Since then I’ve managed to explain that these are the views of many people, it’s not only my own personal views and its just expressing views.

RV: Did they tell you, you could not come back or did they tell you that if you came back you would not leave?

NXP: They have never said that officially but I mean anyone in my position at that time would know that would run into some problems.

RV: If you returned.

NXP: If you happened to be in Vietnam, you know. But I think things have calmed down a little bit and very recently the Vietnamese embassy in Washington D.C. got the green light from the Hanoi government to issue a new passport for me valid until 2008 and so that means that they do not prevent me from going back to Vietnam because now any Vietnamese citizen with a passport can go in and out of Vietnam without asking for visa as it used to be from the Vietnamese authorities.

RV: But would it be difficult for you to leave, would they make problems for you to leave?
NXP: That is big unknown. But I think that they made the right decision, that is
to say there’s not reason why they should prevent me from going back to my own country
but at the same time they would be free to let me go out again or keep me there again, its
up to them.

RV: What did you say, do you think that was so controversial, that really angered
them, what was it?

NXP: The monopoly, the political monopoly of the Vietnam Communist Party,
that’s all.

RV: You criticized the party directly.

NXP: That’s the only thing?

RV: You criticized the party directly.

NXP: Yes.

RV: Yes, okay.

NXP: That is the dictatorship of the proletariat, the very core of the Marxist-
Leninist principle. Except for that there’s nothing else.

RV: Okay, do you regret saying any of that?

NXP: Oh no, not at all. So that is the reason why, I mean if you want to
summarize shall we say all the oral history sessions that we have had up to now, I can try
to put in a nutshell. You can see that I grew up with a very heavy western education,
western value, so I was not able I think to appreciate really the feelings and thinking of
the Vietnamese people in the 1950s or ‘60s you see, and it was only when I got caught
into the political and the Vietnam War with the Saigon government that I became aware
of those issues and problems and I have to recognize you know that even the Vietnamese
communists, they had all the right to claim nationalism but then on top of it, probably
because of circumstances and world evolution in those ‘50s and ‘60s and ‘70s that they
went to the communist bloc, which would be instrumental to help them in their search for
independence and national sovereignty, nationalism for the Vietnamese people, I can
understand them. But I would not grant them the right to claim that nationalism and at the
same time impose the dictatorship of the proletariat on the Vietnamese people.

RV: The two don’t go hand in hand to you?
NXP: They don’t go hand in hand to me you know with my western education and western values and the sense of democracy and freedom that I learned from my school days, and so even until now I’m not convinced at all you see of the kind of nationalism that Ho Chi Minh and his lieutenant profess. I don’t deny them the right to have that. So it is difficult, even now for the Vietnamese people to comprehend really what happened to them, why war came to them in the 1940s, war came to them with the Second World War. Second World War them meant what first, the Petain regime in France, which continued with their colonial policies, even more with the Nazi behind but then you had the Japanese who came and they were really cruel you see, and so all these events then plunged the Vietnamese nation and people into a state of war which then followed with the return of the French troops, the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the signing of the Geneva Accords and then with President Diem and then the intervention of the United States. Things must be put in context in their time and place you see.

RV: You said on page 188 of Hope and Vanquished Reality that “The whole bloody war was not for security and territorial occupation, but for human dignity and feelings” what do you mean?

NXP: Very much so. And you know through all those years in jail I was not able to digest that so after more than a century of French colonial rule and when you came by the end of the Second World War there was a tremendous upsurge all over the world of those you know former colonies to regain their dignity, to regain their independence, to regain their national sovereignty and so on, even for the ordinary farmers in the countryside, he was also able to feel those things, although he may not understand a lot about those things but that’s what he wanted to be, to regain his dignity after more than a century of being you know a second class human being during the French colonial period. And although he did not have any clear idea what independence would mean even now and then with globalization and then what national sovereignty would mean and so on but he wanted to have an end to the foreign presence, to the foreign rule, intervention and so on and that was the things that Ho Chi Minh was very effectively able to use, you see. So it was not really territorial security or fighting battles and get more land, it was to give back those things to the people at that time as anywhere in the world with those former colonies. But then I think that very briefly one may say there were two
wars in one in Vietnam, in the ‘50s, ‘60s, and ‘70s. There was a war between the brother enemies, that is the Vietnamese Communists with Ho Chi Minh, his Vietnam Communist Party and those who oppose that without knowing really what they were but then slowly they called themselves the nationalists you know which was equated to be anti-communist but if you asked what the nationalist was they wouldn’t be able to define that for you, but the communist Vietnamese would be very able to define you know what the Vietnamese communist was at that time by using the nationalist flag and then Ho Chi Minh was very clever not to project communism per se. He only claimed to be a communist, but being a communist be implied that he was fighting for national independence, for national sovereignty and so on, so for the ordinary people especially in the rural areas who didn’t care much to know what communism was but then seeing that in practical terms Ho Chi Minh and his Vietnam Communist Party were fighting, were putting up an effective fight against the foreign presence, against the foreign intervention, so that was not really a fight between the Vietnamese communists and Vietnamese anti-communists you see. But then the whole things escalated so much it became an American war but that did not exclude another conflict between the Vietnamese themselves. So there was two wars in one and even now with the Vietnamese population extremely young, eight percent of them are less than forty years old I think that most people in Vietnam are not much interested in the, to debate the right and wrong of the war in Vietnam, whether the war between brother enemies or the American war.

RV: How best can they go forward?

NXP: Now they are much more interested in the practical solutions for their everyday life and it seems that there’s a general impression that whether you like it or not eventually you have to come to the United States, the most powerful economic power now in the world and that the improvement in your material positions would not be possible without the participation of the United States.

RV: How significant was President Clinton’s visit in 2000 to Hanoi and to Vietnam?

NXP: That you see showed you the mentality on the one hand of the Hanoi government who know well that you must be in good terms, especially economics, trade with the United States. On the other hand, the ordinary people, especially in the urban
accommodations and with the young population over there and President Clinton got a very warm welcome from those youngsters and the generation as a whole and the very popular newspaper, official organ of the Communist Youth of Vietnam call Tu Che, which is In Youth carried out a poll survey among its readers and it showed that eighty percent of the youngsters in Hanoi and Saigon considered Bill Clinton and Bill Gates as their heroes.

RV: Bill Clinton and Bill Gates.

NXP: [Laughing] Yes. The two Bills.

RV: Yes. I remember, I was there standing on the streets with the youth when Clinton’s limousine drove by and they were so excited about the prospect of an American president in Hanoi, so much in fact that they turned and hugged me because I was American and I found that extraordinary, very warm, very genuine and very extraordinary. The youth in Vietnam today obviously will lead the country forward. What place does the Vietnamese community overseas have in Vietnam today and working with that youth going forward?

NXP: Well the overseas Vietnamese try very hard to re-establish that kind of relationship with the youngsters in Vietnam but it is extremely difficult.

RV: Why?

NXP: Because you see first the overseas Vietnamese here, they are so disorganized and they present all kinds of views, platform and they even quarrel among themselves so how can you project that kind of image back home and the serious, the more serious and the more qualified overseas Vietnamese, they already have quit a good life in the United States and France, why would they go back to Vietnam and sweat there for almost nothing you see, so that is very difficult, that’s the first thing.

RV: If I can interrupt, it sounds like there’s a continuation of the crisis of leadership with the overseas Vietnamese that they had in South Vietnam.

NXP: Exactly the same you see and as I said very you know unfortunately for the Vietnamese nation people the only person who was able to fill in with all that void of acute leadership was Ho Chi Minh, so whether you like it or not he was able to lead the Vietnamese people and nation during those decades there. Foch de mir, as the French
would say because there was nobody else except Ngo Dinh Diem who try a little bit you see but he was so much handicapped by all kinds of things.

RV: What do the French say?
NXP: Foch de mir.
RV: Meaning?
NXP: That means a lack of a better thing, you know in the absence of something else you know.
RV: So the overseas Vietnamese today community, they have no common voice.
NXP: Very hard.
RV: And no apparent leadership.
NXP: Very hard, you know in practical terms almost nil, because you have now a number of categories of overseas Vietnamese going back to Vietnam. First of all you have those who returned to find the families, to renew their relationship with the families so that is one kind. The second big group would be the fast buck manipulators going back there for a hit and run business deal, so lots of them go back, small things, you know but they are able to do that and then you have also those who came back just to see the country again, although they may not have lots of families left there, or interested in business. And you may have also a few who may have political ideas and so on but they are usually quit easily detected by the security people and then they will run into problems you see. So and then you have a very small number of experts and technicians going back there, either under the World Bank or the MF or the United Nations specialized agencies, or experts for these foreign governments and so on and also very able ones from the big corporations going there. I remember a small incident that a relative young chap by the name of Khanh, K-H-A-N-H, who was with Shell Oil Company for years and he was eventually named the CEO for Shell Vietnam, Shell was very active also in Vietnam Petroleum and then when he arrived with his team of the Shell executives at the Tan Son Nhut airport he was not allowed to get in because for security reason he was listed in the black book and so all those other French and Dutch guys who were there allowed to get in, they said what do you if the boss cannot get in. And then there was lots of negotiations going in, eventually Khanh was admitted because he was not political at all. But there was also another case of a guy who worked for a long
time with the World Bank and he’s a Vietnamese, overseas Vietnamese from Canada, a
Canadian citizen and he was invited many times by prime minister Vo Nguyen Kiet to go
back to Vietnam to help them, especially in statistics because he was a guy in statistics
but then you have the interpretation of statistics and so on, he was a very good guy. So he
went back there at the invitation of the prime minister and officially handled by the
Foreign Affairs ministry. So at that time, I think the fifth time or something he returned
to Vietnam at the Tincy airport instead of Hanoi airport where it would be much easier
for him because he was on official mission, but at Tincy airport he got cuffed, handcuffed
as soon as he landed and into the airport and taken into a room and there was an official
delegation with the girls and with flowers from the Foreign Affairs Ministry welcoming
him.

RV: They didn’t get to welcome him.
NXP: Yes, and so.
RV: Why did this happen?
NXP: The security in the case but it just catch him and put him in a room so the
officials of the Foreign Affairs Ministry was very disturbed and run after him and got into
there. The security people thought he was a reactionary because he knows lots of
reactionaries in the United States and in Canada and he’s involved in the political
reactionary political activity. The guy said, “What do you mean, I work for the World
Bank for twenty years now, you know I am a statistician, I’m not a politician at all. So
how come?” So the security people said, “ON such a day you met a that guy, on such a
day you met that person, so and so on, they all very anti-communist and fiercely
against the regime and so on.” He said, “But those guys I’ve known them since
childhood. I see them all the time. They may be political, but I’m not at all, there’s no
reason that you consider me as one of them. They are just my childhood friends.” So it
turned out that in the negotiations with the Foreign Affairs representative and so on, the
guy was eventually put back on the place by the security people.

RV: He was not allowed to come in.
NXP: He was not even allowed to come in.
RV: He was invited by the prime minister.
NXP: Yes, big risk. The things like that happen all the time.
RV: How does that make you feel about your country?

NXP: Well, I’m so used to it you know after five years in prison and after nearly twenty years after the communist regime I got some consolation. First of all I was happy to be back by the side of my old parents and that was very important. And then slowly I was pleased to be in the country, in the midst of the people there and very often I went to the, my native villages, Ben Tri province and saw those very simple people, working hard, but really hard, barely able to make a living out of their small lot of land there, you see and thirty years ago during the whole time of the Vietnam War, as now, they are not much interested in those political issues and problems, then they continue to be very concerned with the possibility to feed their kids, to take care of their everyday life problems. And that is in a way a consolation for me, but it also at the same time very sad because those ordinary people, those people in the rural areas, they just submit themselves to circumstances and they accept their lot. And do those people who may think that the Vietnamese are now so poor and unhappy will rise up and change the political regime, I don’t think that they will do that at all.

RV: How will change happen then, from the top?

NXP: And so I think that as all these big empires and regimes it is always an implosion, it’s like the Soviet Union. You didn't put the Soviet Union down by force of arm, it will implode by itself.

RV: So that’s what will happen to Vietnam.

NXP: But if they are clever enough they will make the implosion you know not too violent and have a credible change and they will probably you know take example with the PRC, the People’s Republic of China and so if the people in Beijing can you know introduce those changes, those reforms and then move the whole country economically forward, the Vietnamese will be able to do the same thing.

RV: So Vietnam’s future is going to be dependent on China’s future?

NXP: Very much because I mean unless the United States has a clear cut policy for Vietnam and let the Vietnamese understand what it is expected of them because now they have impression that the way the United States deal with Vietnam is a bit of a tail of the China policy of the United States, that is to accommodate Vietnam with the China policy, not to upset too much China you know because what you do in Vietnam, and so
the more you do there, the more you push the Vietnamese into the arms of Chinese. Because they have no way out and the crisis of leadership is even more acute now than before so it is almost you know in a way it is a condition, it is almost without a government and at the same times it’s a very hard regime you see, and so it would be very interesting to look into those aspects and then you may find the solutions for the Vietnamese people.

RV: Would you ever want to play a role personally in the future of Vietnam?

NXP: At some times, not because I like it, I don't like it at all but maybe to help those who are interested you know to do something about Vietnam. I’ve never belonged to any political party or group and in fact during the whole period I was in the Saigon government I was not blindly obsesses by the position of the United States of the Saigon government but I tired very much to find something to share, that’s what I wanted to do with those number, it was very completely naïve of me of course but that was the forces pushing me during those years instead of the killing. There must be a way to avoid, so that’s why when they thought of dividing the cake all the time I tried to put them together in the same cake, instead of cutting the cake even in smaller pieces and that was the thing that I tried to do and I have always tried to do thing very quietly, so it is not for me personally. I am not a public person in a political life.

RV: What is your opinion of the United States today, after all of your experience and now living here?

NXP: Well first of all I don't know whether you agree with me or not.

RV: That doesn’t matter really.

NXP: But you have to live with what you have and the United States also is a tremendous human experience, unique you see and it is very difficult for people elsewhere in the world to understand the United States because in many respects I have the impression that you do not understand it yourself, that is what is going on, what will we become and things like that. Anybody can say anything here and than anybody can try anything but in the end I think there’s no prophet possible to say what will become of the United States and for many people it is a kind of enormous empire as you know you had the Egyptians, the Romans and the Greeks and I don’t know what else, and the Chinese before and so if you look at history you will see the rise and fall of those
empires. I very much hope that although the United States of America may be considered as a kind of an empire but it will not go into the path of the past empires you see, because it is also a different kind of empire compared to the ones that happened before the last ten thousand years you see. So maybe that would save the United States and whether you like it or not, especially now, you will continue to be the superpower you know and then you have to assume the role you know that history has given you, that is to be the leader, leader not because you want to be the leader but because you have become the most powerful, the richest nation in the world, even if you don’t want to be a leader you cannot avoid that and because of that you have also to pay a very dear price, that is the price of arrogance. Whether you like it or not you cannot avoid that, whatever the good deeds can do in the world people will say that you’re a bully and that’s it but probably the world need a bully and you know from this sociologists probably and historians will say that you know, you need a leader, if you have a group you need a leader. You may not need a leader if the group is too small but I suppose that when you have about ten or twenty people, there’s a need for a leader, that’s a natural thing, it is a human nature, you cannot avoid that you see and it seems that always you know in life you have those who excel, probably a third and those who are really bad guys about a third at the bottom and you also have in the middle, that is the melting pot, going on and on and on, you know trying to produce the leaders and trying to eliminate slowly the bad guys and you had to do that, you cannot avoid that. So if now you know the 19940s present themselves once more I doubt very much that you have choices, you just follow you know the circumstances and you do the same things again.

RV: Do you miss your country?

NXP: Oh, yes I miss my country very much but I think that I have lived abroad you know a large part of my life and so often that I can make any country as my own but at the same time you cannot deny that when you grew up somewhere you have roots there, you have memories there, especially when you have the parents there so you miss it in that sense. But I don't miss it politically or militarily or socially, you know that things. But I think the most important aspect in life is to be useful so if not then it doesn’t exist.

RV: Looking back at your life, how would you describe it?
NXP: That is something that I ask myself very often. What I can tell you exactly that what we have been doing for the last few months here, for oral history I consider myself first of all as a kind of a witness, you know, a rather I would say that objective witness and what I have been doing here for the last few months with you is to try and remember and relate things which happened to me since childhood and that would be a kind of shall we say witness to begin with. But at the same time I am not trying to make judgments, I think I have tried in the last few months, to descry, to remember events and the feelings, the thoughts which came or struck me at those particular times and just I relate them as I went through them, not very much aware of the good and bad, or the right and wrong of one side or another and so it may be a bit chaotic what I have tired to relate, but that was what happened to me and it is also I said a few minutes earlier, understandable. I grew up in the west, I had western values, I was not very much aware of the emotions and feelings of the Vietnamese people in the ‘40s, ‘50s, ‘60s and so on and then eventually I became aware of those Vietnamese thinking and value instead of mine and even right now I think the Vietnamese are searching for what I have always called their national identity. They are so much indoctrinated by the Marxist-Leninist ideas of the Hanoi government which are catching on less and less on the youngsters in Vietnam with the collapse of the Soviet Union but that was how I felt at those times, with the thoughts, the feeling, the emotions you see and even with the retrospective, the experience that I went through I would even say that now if history repeats itself I wouldn’t be much wiser really because the basic issues.

RV: You would not be?

NXP: Not, I would not be much wiser you know. I found myself almost in the same dilemma when I was in the Vietnam War and right now you put me in the Iraq problem, I would see the same problems again. The present intervention of a foreign power, aspirations of people there, whether rightly or wrongly they have to accept that foreign presence which claimed to be good to them and which may be good to them too but many of them would not understand and would be again problems of survival to begin with and the problems of as I said some human dignity to preserve because you can push a man up that point, when he feels that he had been reduced to a kind of an animal level, then he will behaving level and then the need to improve economically, socially,
mainly for the kids. So you will have guerilla warfare again, you have claims for self-
determination, you will have elections, freedom, democracy, as much as the people can
absorb it and understand it and so as I said, maybe you know I wouldn’t be much wise if
those things happened again, because they don’t happen exactly the same way but the
basic problems are there, so we have to have some kind of order, some kind of
understanding or agreement to establish a kind of order that everybody can understand,
that everybody can respect, be willing to defend you see. The bad guys in the world you
will have them all the time you see, its like the police, you have to police and the
Vietnam War was basically a problem of police, not a big war and you have to reduce
those bad guys, that’s all until the day you are able to re-educate them.

RV: Do you have children?
NXP: No, I don’t have any, I have lots of adopted children.
RV: Do you regret not having children?
NXP: Oh yes, very much so that’s why I think I’m able to love all the children.
I’m crazy about children, especially when they are about five years old. Oh yes, that’s
when you can tease them best and I always dreamt you know that probably the earth
would be very proud as if the kids of our five years never grow up.

RV: How do you want to be remembered?
NXP: I don’t think that I have thought of that thing at all, no, no. To be remember
or not is not a big thing for me. But I would like to be thought of in the family rather
because I was able to get the family together by refurbishing that family burial grounds in
our native village of Vao To for sixty graves, that lot has been three for 150 years and so I
spent a lot of time and money to refurbish everything. I mow the whole cemetery and it is
the very big tradition, Vietnamese exactly ten days before Tet all the relatives must
gather at the burial grounds to clean up the place and in the past it was a bit abandoned
but for the last ten years been able to you know embellish the whole thing and they are
very proud to come back there to take care of the ancestors and that is the big thing for
me. I am sure they will remember me for just that, and just for that I would be happy to
be remembered, nothing else, that each year kin manage to get together they spent the
whole day, you know take down the grass and try to wash the graves and so on and at the
time when the families, I would say the greater family seemed to disintegrate. I can see
that in my relatives, that they are not eager just on the twentieth of the last month of the year, that is ten days before Tet to have a big reunion and traditionally we always started at the sunrise, so it was about four in the morning you know that we all gathered there and most of them arrived in the night from everywhere and then we all go to the burial grounds together, stay there have lunch and talk until the sun set on that day and then disperse again and disappear for a year, so that is probably the answer that I would give to your question.

RV: Is that where you want to be buried?

NXP: Very much, but it’s not, it’s not, what is it, compulsory if I may say so.

RV: Okay. Well, sir is there anything else that you would like to add to our discussions we’d have over the past nine, ten months?

NXP: No, I don’t think that I regret anything.

RV: Okay, well sir thank you very much for your time and we will officially end the interview with Ambassador Nguyen Xuan Phong. Thank you very much, sir.

NXP: Thank you.