

3-27-1989

# Interview with Bruce Phimphone Sengkhamyong (FA 83)

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TRANSCRIPTION

Name of Oral History Project Southeast Asian Refugee

Tape 1 of 1. The number of the tape being transcribed 1

Name of narrator: Bruce Phimphone Sengkhamyong

Address: 725 Hugh Poland Hall  
Western Kentucky University Tel. 745-4740

Name of principal interviewer: Richard F. Hale

Date of interview: March 27, 1989 Place of interview: WKU Fine Arts Bldg.

Other persons present at interview: none

Equipment used: Reel-to-reel /; Cassette /; Model: 685-6168 JC Penney

Tape used: Brand Ampex 672; Amount (side 1) 30 min (side 2) 20 min.

Summary description of interview context and contents:

The interview was done in a seminar room in the Fine Arts Building at Western Kentucky University. Sengkhamyong is a student at WYU and is a refugee from Laos. The main thrust of the interview has to do with the religious life in Laos as compared to the religious life in the United States.

HALE

I would like for you to start by giving me your your real name. I know you as Bruce, but I know your name is different, and then just tell me a little about yourself, what part of Southeast Asia you are from, and a little bit about your family.

SENGKHAMYONG

My name is Bruce Phimphone Sengkhamyong. Phimphone Sengkhamyong is my real original name, and since I became an American citizen last Fall and my American name is Bruce. And Bruce is my first name now, Phimphone, which was my original name, is my middle name, and my last name Sengkh Sengkhamyong, still is my last name. And I am from Laos. I was born in Xieng Khoung, located in the northern Laos. In Xieng Khoung, in one time, they had war going on between Communists and free side. My uncle is a colonel, so he went

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there and take our family [two words not intelligible]. Each family have to choose side, either communist side or free side, so my family choose free side, so we have to get out of Xieng Khouang, come down to middle to Vientiane, which the capital. So I stay there from 1969 to 1975, in Vientiane, and my Dad had a bus business. We have three buses in Vientiane. Before my Dad came to Vientiane he was put in prison, during the war going on. Only my family and my Mom's came to Vientiane. He stayed behind. He didn't-- put in prison. The reason they put him in prisoner--prison because he's a salesman back in Xieng Khouang, and the communists doesn't like salesperson, they have a smart-- have a [unintelligible word] and make money and everthing like that. They like someone poor so they can control them. So they accuse him is CIA and put him in jail. So my family, not including my Dad, come to Vientiane, stay for a while. It is hard for my Mom just only herself to take care of all of us. And about two years later, my Dad, he escaped from a communist prison. He had a -- his legs swelled up, swelling. He said he going die anyway, he might as well die from-- instead of dying in prison, maybe he had a chance to escape, so he escaped. And he did make it. He came to our house in Vientiane. And I never did see my Dad before. I was a baby when I left him. I don't know what he looked like. Then one night it was dark, my Dad and my two friends, they all escape together, came to our house and my Mom point at him and say, "That is your Dad." Boy, [unintelligible words], that's what joy we had. I know what he look like now. And then I found out that's my real Dad. We stay in Vientiane until 1975, the the communists came in our country-- the whole country, because the leader of the communists and the leader-- our president-- is brothers-- same Mom, but different Dads. So we thought that brothers shouldn't fight brothers. So we come to sign a peace treaty. So now communists came in my country, they talk to people and persuade people what is wrong with our government before, what it did, and it sounds good to them because our government do the corruption and stuff and take all the money for themselves, and it's true and it sounds good to them. So people thought the communists would be better to rule our country. A lot of, including students, young men go on strike and then our government, old government can't stand it, and have to leave

the country. And then they will take some of the old army, the ones that be against them before, take them to seminary. That's what they say, but it's a concentration camp. They take to the seminary and never return, because the reason they did that, they put them in concentration camp, work them real hard, and give them less food so they died afterward. So they use them, get benefit of them, instead killed them. [Unintelligible words] whether old army or captain, even a old prisoner like my Dad. As soon as communists coming and we know my Mom and Dad already had a plan, so we get out country right then. It's kind of easy before it get serious, so we get out. And stay in Thailand for three years from 1975 to 1978. First we had a name to go to France, and my parents said, "Lot of people go to France, and it's kind of small country it's so crowded." So we wait for another country call our name. So second year now had a name to go to Australia, so we said-- my parents said, "That's better, but I want the best one [laughs] best country to go to which U. S. A." so we wait until third year and then had a name to come to the U. S. That be the last decision. Most families come and in a couple months they have a name to [unintelligible words]. We stay there three years until we get what we hope for. So I came to U. S. in 1978.

HALE Can you describe what your religious life was like in Laos and also the three years in Thailand?

SENGKHAMYONG Okay, in Laos my family believed in Buddhism. That's most Laotians believe in. Could be like either one to five per cent whole population is Christian. I saw a few. My brother and I, you know, used to go to the small church that set up-- it's a American pastor there-- to show a movie about Jesus. All we did was just go to the movie. We don't even know what's going on. And some people, I heard they were talking about how Jesus died, which is kind of awkward to them, because in Buddhism, the man that started this religion just laid back and relaxed and died, after eating pork. And that's why people believe in that pork isn't supposed be eaten-- believe that it is kind of poison. So most Indians-- some Indians don't eat pork. [unintelligible phrase]

And that's how the man Buddhist-- the man found Buddhism died. Nice way. And then they compare to the Jesus-- Jesus dies suffering and people thought-- look at-- and here's the religion leader and he dies suffering and they make fun of him. I kind of had feeling too, but I didn't say anything about it, about the way he died. I guess people don't know what's going on. And yes, my family is Buddhism. And every morning in Buddhism, every morning the people would go out, take their basket of rice-- would go out and wait for monks to come-- have come by. They would line up, then when the monk come, people rice from their basket, put in the basket with the strap around his neck. So they would do that, then the monk would walk along and he would come back to the temple, and then they would eat breakfast. I don't know what time they would eat. I didn't go check [laughs]. Then at lunch people would take food to the temple and let the monk eat. So monk they don't have to cook-- don't have to only just eat what the people [unintelligible word] to them. And they would preach to them in their-- at lunch time. Before they--I'm not sure-- before they or after they eat. Maybe before. I just [unintelligible word] before they eat, they preach to them. And about go to heaven-- one of the family have to-- what do you call it when someone become a monk? Shave their head--?

HALE Be ordained

SENGKHAMYONG Ordained? Yes. Like if I become a monk I shave my head and get a yellow robe. Ordained? Yes. Each family-- one of them have to be ordained. Not the whole life, just a period, a short period of time. Like one time my great, great mother died, and then my Mom come to us. I have two brothers. And she said, "One of you have to be ordained." And we look at each other, me and my brothers, We don't want to shave our heads, you know, so we-- we-- I told my brothers-- my Mom to pick my brother, point at him, pick him, and he would say to pick me. And we argue so my Mom say, "You all three". [laughs] so we all three have to be ordained. We go to the barber and shave our heads and we went to a funeral. We would wear the yellow robe and we don't wear underwear. You not supposed to wear underwear. So we do that all one day, all day long. The funeral, it's in the house. They would [unintelligible word] body in the casket in the living room and then have a picture and a flower.

And we would do service all day long until the evening, then they would take the body and casket, put on the truck, and then would tie a long rope on the front of the truck. Then the relatives of the person that died, family, would come grab the rope and act like they pulling the truck along to the temple to burn it. And we would burn the body. After body is burned, everybody leave. We come home and I change my clothes and back to normal. The next day the person that supposed to pick up the bones of the burned, collect the bones and then bury the bones and then put the stone on the top of the grave in the temple. That means if someone die, instead of going to hell-- to the hell, we have-- because the one of us ordained-- our yellow robe help the soul, you know, go to heaven. It's the belief. If one the family-- a person die and doesn't have anyone ordained and there is no yellow robe to secure her or his soul go to heaven, he-- he or his soul is not good enough in going to heaven, but the yellow robe would help him soul go to heaven. It's a belief. And also believe if you kill animal, we have to eat it, and take part of it, give to the monk. So my grandma she usually kill chicken-- she kill and take half of it for us food and take the other half, cook it, and take to temple. That's the rule, you know, in Buddhism. And also had a-- we believe in reincarnation, like a-- before we can be a human, I don't know how many lives we been through, believes that maybe we been through a frog and chicken or something else, then we come back to be human-- before we can become human, like we come as-- if someone kill-- kill animal and-- just kill him and then next life he would be the animal. The animal would become human and kill him back. That's kind of what I believe. So we have to-- we're not supposed to kill them, we have to eat them and take part to the temple. Okay.

HALE You said you did service when the body was in the home for the funeral. What do you mean by doing service? What were your responsibilities?

SENGKHAMYONG I do nothing. I just stay there [pause] sit there and listen to the monk, the real monk preaching and just be part of it. I don't have to do anything. I'm not the real one.

HALE What would the monk do during this time?

SENGKHAMYONG Okay, they would sit down and people would sit on the side and listen to them. They would-- maybe could be-- be the leader of mine and could sit right beside him. He would preach

on this time, you know, in a monotone. I don't know necessarily what they would say. It was like a-- it's hard to understand unless you have it to read.

HALE Was it a set thing that they said at every funeral? Was it something they memorized just to say, or was it like a sermon in a church here?

SENGKHAMYONG Yes, it's something they memorize. Because they come in there without book-- go "wrrrr, wrrrr, wrrrr," all together So they are professionals in that.

HALE In going to the temple, was there a regular time that religious services were held other than when you went at noon? Was there a special day, or how were the services scheduled?

SENGKHAMYONG Usually it's a very good time every day, like at noon, people would go and that's it. The monk would eat in the afternoon, that's all. They don't eat dinner. So they have to eat a lot. And then sometimes they have some kind of special day like a festival. You would take lots of food and just go to temple, bring more food to them, and all eat at temple. They have special [unintelligible word]. But they have just regular routine every day. We go to the temple. I usually don't go there, because, you know--. Only my Mom would go doing her business. Usually my Grandma always goes there, she always go to church just about every day. Like a special day she would take me to church so I can eat. Not church-- temple.

HALE Was business set up so there was a long lunch period or was there a long time in the middle of the day so that people who worked at a job could go to the temple at noon, or did they just go at some other time if they had a job during the day?

SENGKHAMYONG If they had a job they can't go at noon. They maybe-- they probably send one of the family that doesn't have a job. There would be one. Usually the wife, or if wife doesn't go, if wife works and they have Grandma, Grandma would go. People doing their-- have a job [unintelligible word] the job. And really, it's not really strict. People have the choice to go [unintelligible words]. Most religion taught the people to be good, so they believe in that. They have to go. They have to be good. Not all religions taught people to be good. I know some religions, I heard, that taught people to kill.

HALE                    Alright, What is your religious life like now?

SENGKHAMYONG Right now? I am really totally Baptist, because I change as soon I came here. My brother-in-law, who was pastor in Laos, Baptist, when we came here he took us to church. Then we learn, and then he show us what-- you know, how to read the Bible, and show-- at home he would preach to us, if we don't go to church. And then I find the difference, you know, every single product have to have owner-- every thing is not evolve of itself--have somebody to make it, so I believe the world has someone who has to make the world, create it. Seems like it's true you know, and also, America's so rich and powerful, and they believe in God, at least in Jesus and they become, you know, powerful. Because of what? [unintelligible words] God bless America. [unintelligible words] that make me, I got baptized and I soon after I baptized-- before that I decide I belong to the Baptist, and not Buddhism. Now I accept Baptism. And in Laos, even though I'm Buddhist, I'm not strictly because I'm not like an adult. An adult, you know, know a lot, so I'm strictly not in Buddhism. I just go along with my family because my family Buddhist at that time, so I'm not to be-- I'm still little so I just follow my Grandma and my parents. I don't, you know, really believe that much. So I know what's going on now [unintelligible word] Buddhism. Christianity is more realistic than Buddhism. My Grandma also point out that Buddhism-- what is God? What made of? And I was thinking of-- yes, that is true. Because they worship their own idol, created by their hand. That's really true. Any spirit can go there. Sometime it showed the power. But any spirit can go in the idol and show the power. Could be the [laughs] wrong spirit. And that's all.

HALE                    Can you describe what your worship is like now where you attend? You go to . . . ?

SENGKHAMYONG Yes, I go to Hillview Heights Baptist Church. I go to-- first I go to college class Sunday School. After that I would go to Laotian class, Laotian class is led by Dr. Boonsong. He's from Thailand. So he stay there and preach the gospel to all the Laotians the whole time. So by time I finish the Sunday School in the college class and I go to his-- I go to Dr. Boonsong's class-- by time he is finished his preaching, so we start singing. So I go in the right time



and sing with them. After we sing, then we pray and then we go home. That's our routine we do at my church.

HALE Do you sing in Laotian? Do you sing in English? How do you choose your songs?

SENGKHAMYONG Okay. We sing both. First we start with our Laotian. Then more people ask, request you know, for-- we sing both. We just-- anybody can pick theirs-- we just sing them. Somebody will say, "Sing this hymn." So we sing it. It's about both of them-- both languages. A lot of songs. I be the one that show them the new song sometimes, because I used to sing a lot of hymns-- brother-in-law teach me to sing. I went to Arkansas and I pick a new song this Christmas day and I take it to church and showed them how to sing it-- in Laotian. Our favorite song to sing in English is Amazing Grace. [Laughs]

HALE That's a favorite song here, too.

SENGKHAMYONG Yes, everybody in our class know that one.

HALE Now the college class that you go to-- it's in English?

SENGKHAMYONG Yes

HALE And just a regular Sunday School class?

SENGKHAMYONG Yes, just a regular Sunday School class. Mrs.-- I forgot her name-- the pastor's wife, she teach us.

HALE Mrs. Courtney?

SENGKHAMYONG Mrs. Courtney, that's right. She teaches my Sunday School class.

HALE Are there any other international students in the Sunday School class?

SENGKHAMYONG In the college class?

HALE Yes.

SENGKHAMYONG No, it's only a lot of Americans. Only oriental.

HALE Now in your worship service, are there others? You mentioned Laotians, and Dr. Boonsong is Thai. Are there other nationalities represented in that service?

SENGKHAMYONG There will be two brothers and sisters, Iranian, and once in while we will have Cambodian came to our church, but he had difficult time to listen to lesson and would come, just visit and would never come back. Once in while we have another Vietnamese that would come visit and never return. I can understand that.

HALE Do the Iranians understand Laotian?

SENGKHAMYONG No, they don't understand the Laotian, but they do listen to the-- When Dr. Boonsong read the English verse. Then he will translate into Thai. Laotian and Thai understand each other even though it's different language. It's kind of similar. Sounds strange, but we understand each other.

HALE Okay, you said you are completely Baptist. You don't retain any of the Buddhist practices at all?

SENGKHAMYONG No.

HALE If they were to build a Buddhist temple in Bowling Green, where would you attend?

SENGKHAMYONG I'd still go to Baptist Church. I heard that lady, you know, what's her name, Mrs.-- in our meeting that time we came-- she was--

HALE Mrs. Deputy?

SENGKHAMYONG Mrs. Deputy. She brought the Cambodian girl. She told me there's a Buddhist temple in Bowling Green that Laotian people attend. I thought it's in my church that's all the Laotians that go there, but she said something else-- that Laotians go to the Buddhist temple. Maybe that's not big right now, but they did go. Kind of surprised me.

HALE I don't know. I haven't heard of one.

SENGKHAMYONG Maybe it's not big Buddhist temple, but part of one-- little section [unintelligible words] She told me to go visit. I told her that I am Baptist. She said okay, even though you're Baptist, just come visit them. I say okay, but I never did go. I'd like to just go visit them, meet the people. Like I said, if there's temple-- if Buddhist temple, I still remain Baptist.

HALE Now your family is in Arkansas, is that right?

SENGKHAMYONG Yes.

HALE How did they decide to go to Arkansas?

SENGKHAMYONG Okay. First my brother-in-law came to live in-- tried to pick good college to study--Christian college-- so his sponsor pick Campbellsville Baptist-- I mean Campbellsville College. So one day he went to Campbellsville Baptist Church, then he announced that he had a family back in Thailand--was ours-- my family and we'd like to have a sponsor, so the pastor of that church sponsor us so we have to go to-- we come to Nashville, then we go to Campbellsville We stuck in Campbellsville. It's not a very big city. And then about six months-- my Dad, he always worked in Laos to-- and he stayed at home that whole time. He don't know how to stay. He got to do something. And in Campbellsville, doesn't have job, only in restaurant and he doesn't speak English. So we have relative in Arkansas, Ft. Smith, Arkansas. It's a bigger city and lots of jobs. He can work there without speak any words. He still can work in the factory. So after six months he decide go to Arkansas. So he took the bus by himself-- can't speak any English-- only use sign language. He told us everytime the bus stopped he have to got out and show bus driver his ticket, so make sure he can transfer to right bus. After three years my Mom went to Arkansas, stayed with my Dad. All of us kids still stay with my brother-in-law and sister in Campbellsville till finish up their high school. After couple years later when my sister finish middle school-- smaller than me and the other one in seventh grade-- so they decide to go to Arkansas stay with my parents. Left us three boys with my brother-in-law and my sister. After I graduate from high school and my brother-in-law and my sister graduate from college-- Campbellsville College-- so they went to Arkansas to get job down there preaching-- being pastor. And then left us three boys-- me and two brothers in Campbellsville. Everybody started moving to Arkansas, so I decide to stay. When my parents move, I decide to stay. I want to stay here by myself-- was responsible-- can I get? Want to be responsible and be myself. I have to do it when I get married. [Laughs]