

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
CHONG NENG XIONG
Laos Army, Vietnam War.

2003

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Xiong, Chong Neng, (1953-). Oral History Interview, 2003.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 30 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 30 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Chong Neng Xiong, a Laos native, discusses his experiences in the Laos Army during the Vietnam War. Xiong explains how the Americans involved the Hmong people with the war in Vietnam. He expresses sadness over his father's and six brothers' being killed by Vietnamese soldiers. After his brother was killed, he describes being drafted to take his place in 1968 and receiving very little military training. He talks about frequent fighting while stationed at "Camp Xia Pao 62" and states he participated in twenty-eight battles. Xiong comments on having dreams about the war every night and sometimes sleepwalking. In 1978, he details fleeing to Thailand and crossing the Mekong River using bamboo as a flotation device. He touches on traveling between Laos and Ban Vinai, a refugee camp in Thailand, to help other people until 1988. Xiong speaks of immigrating to Oshkosh (Wisconsin) in 1990.

Biographical Sketch:

Xiong (b.1953) fought in Laos during the Vietnam War. During the time he was in service, his name was Vang Neng Xiong, but in processing documents to come to the U.S. he changed his name to Chong Neng Xiong. He raised seven children and settled in Oshkosh (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by William Hodge, 2003

Translated from White Hmong and transcribed by Nou Yang, 2009

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Transcribed Interview:

Xiong: When I-- [Unintelligible] My real age is quite different from, but I used my brother's age. So even when I filed paper to come, I used that same age

Interpreter: Okay. Before we continue talking--

Hodge: Ask him if whether he has any questions before we start.

Interpreter: We talked about this little [his age], but before he talks to you is there any questions you want to ask him before you talk, talking about what he wants to discuss?

Xiong: Uh hmm, I can hear him when he asks, how old-- when Koua was here. When Koua was here, Koua said that he wanted to meet me so that he could bring me to talk with him [Hodge], but Koua couldn't arrange a time. But once we met at the library, they told us to be interviewed for this. But for the those of us who live in town, it was okay that we come whenever. What I wanted to ask, is I want to know where he is from, or what he wants to discuss about and what he is going to do with my interview so that I can prepared and know what is going on

Interpreter: He has one question. He have heard about you before from Mr. Vang

Hodge: Okay. Koua Vang

Interpreter: He just wants to know more about the project and what you are doing with the project. What is the project so he can understand why his story needs to be there.

Hodge: Okay. How to translate this. You can't. We ran into this a few days ago. I am an anthropologist. I am a person who studies all different kinds of people all over the world. And I am working and he can keep this. [Opens a pamphlet/document]. See, this is in Madison, the Veterans Museum. And I don't know if you've been to it or he's been to it or not. It's just off the square, the northwest corner. And what they are doing is that they are trying to get what they call oral history. That is a recorded oral account of service experiences of all kinds of veterans in Wisconsin. I mean it's just not—it's World War II, Korea war, white Americans in Vietnam. And the few that are left in like World War I, the Spanish American war. [Unintelligible] Ah okay. And it doesn't have anything about Hmong and you know the other Chinese. And what-- and the problem of why I think this is important is that especially politicians and educators and the general public don't know enough about Hmong, Vietnamese, and Cambodian, any of them. And what will happen here with his permission is that his story along with fifteen other stories will be kept in the archives on the

second floor of this museum and people can come in and listen to them and do research and read books about what happened. The museum itself-- have you been to the museum? It's on the -- It's across the street from the Capitol building on the northwest corner.

Interpreter: Have you gone to the museum? It's where the sun rises on the side of the Capitol in Madison.

Xiong: No, I haven't gone there, but they have taught what area it is.

Interpreter: I will tell you a little about his answer to your questions. He is what they call, an anthropologist, but us Hmong don't have words like that. But these anthropologists study about Samkoong (??) and types of people and how they grow up, their customs and way of life. This is the kind of job that he studied. For the museum, the veterans' museum in Madison, they keep track of skills, happenings and history of soldiers in Wisconsin. The soldiers who go fight other places and they keep their belongings keep as memoirs there. They think about World War I to World War II, to American Hispanic War, to the Korea War, and Vietnam War. It's the wars that Wisconsin soldiers participated in. It's at this time that he went to work there and there was no Hmong, Cambodian, or Vietnamese history. So, he thought to interview Hmong people, like fifteen people. You, fifteen people's stories about your life will be at the Veterans' Museum on the 2nd floor for those who come and want to know about Hmong people, so they will have some history. For what they call oral history, it is your history through our conversations, about your life story that will be on the cassettes, and there people can learn. And for government officials and politicians in Wisconsin, they can learn about the Hmong people here. There are some that don't know about Hmong people. When these politicians are becoming politicians, they may have said they knew about Hmong people, but they may not know well. If they wanted to they can research and read about Hmong people. This is his answer to your question about what he is doing. Did you have any words to ask him?

Hodge: Also, have you read the *Northwestern* today?

Interpreter: No. Not yet

Hodge: Okay. Read it. One first page, there is a story that Washington has a bill in front of it to extend and make it easier for Hmong to become citizens, for some especially old people it's been harder. It's all just-- [Unintelligible]

Interpreter: --American palace (??) from the war—rescue from the war. Even though they have to lost many lives to save one American life, they did. And when the Hmong come to this country, many Americans don't understand

why we are here. But he is thankful that many of you, including you, want to talk to Hmong about the Hmong story and care about the Hmong life. So he is very happy.

Hodge: Of course. Tell him that ah-- [Unintelligible]

Xiong: -- long then we can slowly talk, but if time is short we can just choose what is more important to discuss.

Interpreter: In discussing your life, from when you were born until—[Sidetracked, filling out paper work] -- That line is to sign your name, date, and there print your name so it is not connected so they can read your name, address, phone number--

Xiong: When I was soldier there, my name was Vang Neng, but coming to this country, after being accepted [to the US], I changed it to Chong Neng. So I'll just use Chong Neng [name on the paper].

Hodge: [Describe what]--your life was like in Laos before the war.

Interpreter: Can you tell him a little about your life in Laos, before becoming a soldier? Tell him your life.

Xiong: My name was, when I lived far away [Laos], when I was soldier--my name--

Interpreter: Before you were a soldier--

Xiong: My name was Vang Neng Xiong.

Interpreter: Your mother and father?

Xiong: My mother and father had me in Samnur. Samnur, MethaKo (??), located over there. I was born in the year--the fifth month, third day in 1953. Before I could fully rationale, there had been French troops or others who intervened, but that is all I am going to mention.

In 1961 January 20, I'm not sure if it was Kennedy or whoever came to talk with Vang Pao at the Pa Dom. The discussion that they had at the Pa Dom was about them, [the Americans] had come many times to talk to the Lao King but the Lao King had told the Americans that he probably couldn't help them, so they would have to meet a Hmong person, named Vang Pao. As a result, they came to meet at the Pa Dom. They came and made promises about Hmong, Hmong people helping the Americans. General Vang Pao had asked in what way they wanted help. At that time, the Americans were engaged in warfare in Southern Vietnam. In the path

from North to South Vietnam, part of our country Laos laid between this path in Vietnam and Vietnam is also curved because of this; soldiers that came and shot Americans [here], many Americans had died at [at this point] so they came and contacted with General Vang Pao like I said before. In contact, [Vang Pao] said why have you contacted me?—They wanted us to be a secret army to cut the path where the Vietnamese soldiers cross from Laos into Southern Vietnam. Because from there [the path between North and South Vietnam] there were a lot of cut offs, [due to warfare interference] they [the Vietnamese soldiers] cut through Laos. So the Americans came and contacted with Vang Pao for us to help shoot [defend] that area. When we first defended that area it seemed that the Vietnamese soldier changed position and shoot us [to see us as their enemy] and the Southern Vietnamese people.

Interpreter: Okay, let me translate into English that first and see if he has any questions and then we can continue.

So he said I was born in 1953. When I was small I didn't do much but, until 1960, 1961. I'm not sure of the American who come and contacted with General Vang Pao, I don't know exactly who that was. But, that time the Americans had a contract with, they come to see the Lao government, but he, Lao, doesn't really want to help the Americans, so they referred the Americans to Vang Pao, who is one of the Hmong in the Northern part of Laos, to get them involved as a secret service to help cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. So he got involved with that around '60 or '61.

Hodge: Okay. Very good. How was he trained to be a soldier?

Interpreter: How were you taught to be soldier? When you became a soldier, how did they teach you?

Xiong: They didn't. Because our country had a lot of warfare, we didn't have a chance to learn how to be a soldier or even learn a letter [study], because heavy warfare came and we were just taught how to shoot and we just went. But I have, my father and-- [tearing up]

Hodge: Tell him he can stop if he wants to, I do not want him to feel bad.

Interpreter: He said if you want to rest or stop, you tell him because he doesn't want you to be have sadness.

Xiong: It's just that telling my story-- my whole family died; I'm sad.

Interpreter: He said he when to talk about his personal life, because many of his family members killed during the war, he feels very sad talking about that.

- Hodge: Well, would it be best if we just stop now or would he like to talk, can he talk about himself without talking about his family, but he is not forced. We can stop.
- Interpreter: He said should we not talk about this story?
- Xiong: We can talk about it, but if I don't talk about this I don't know where to start. I just want to say that in my family, there are many who were killed by [Vietnamese] soldiers. Now there is only me and one brother living far away. In the year that Vang Pao, the Americans came and asked us to help in the war, my family—the men, my deceased father was killed by soldiers; my brothers, we had eight but even six of them were killed by soldiers.
- Interpreter: So there are only two of you?
- Xiong: Yes, only the two of us. Me and my brother who lives far away [Laos].
- Interpreter: I feel very sad. I want to continue on and talk about the story.
- Hodge: Okay. I realize this is painful, but thank you for going on.
- Interpreter: He said that I feel really sad, because my dad, we had eight brothers but six of my brothers including my dad they were killed in the war. And now I have me and one of my brother.
- Hodge: That's left of the family. These were Communists Vietnamese?
- Interpreter: The soldiers who killed your family, were they Communist Vietnamese soldiers?
- Xiong: Yes, that's the correct army.
- Interpreter: Yes.
- Hodge: What year did he and his brothers and so forth start fighting in?
- Interpreter: In what year did your brothers and you all start fighting in the war?
- Xiong: Beginning in year '61, when Kennedy came to talk with General Vang Pao, my brothers and my father all subsequently started to die helping the Americans until 1971.
- Interpreter: Start from '61, since when President Kennedy contacted with General Vang Pao, my family start war from '61 until '71.

- Hodge: Okay, can he talk about what sort of training did he have? The Americans or somebody must have? Did he know how to handle guns before? Or what sort of training?
- Interpreter: He's talking again about before, about what you learned and what kind of training did you go through since we didn't talk about it.
- Xiong: At first, when I went, I hadn't learned anything [no experience]. My brother, like I said, my middle brother who is elder than me, he went to war and died. The government wouldn't let down and required that I go defend the land and country. In year '68, I don't remember the day, but in '68 just went to replace his name [replace his brother's position]. Just to learn how to shoot guns, nothing else; just to replace his name [replace brother] and further along a little training.
- Interpreter: My family start war in 1961, but one of my brothers was killed during '67, '68. And I was just drafted to replace his position. I just start there, but I didn't have any training. They just showed me how to operate a gun and then go to the field.
- Hodge: What kind of gun was it?
- Interpreter: What kind of gun?
- Xiong: When I went to kill, I used a Carbon gun, like this one [referring to a picture].
- Interpreter: Ah, yeah. A Carbon 8 shot. More than 8 shot?
- Xiong: 15 shots.
- Hodge: How much?
- Interpreter: 15 shots. 15.
- Hodge: 15. Okay. Yeah, there was a Hmong this morning. This is not funny, but he said they gave him a gun like this and they showed him how to fire three times, and then they said go and start killing communists. Yeah, you know, sheesh, but anyway--
- Intrepretator: This morning, there was Hmong who talked to him. It's not a funny story, but he told him a little that he was given a gun and only practiced shooting three times and then already went off to war and killing.
- Hodge: But, what happened when he replaced his brother? What kind of fights were he in and things like that?

- Interpreter: When you were made to replace your brother, how was war like? What kind of fighting and killing did you engage in?
- Xiong: When I replaced my brother, war—like I said earlier, our country is located far away, but because of war we came to live in Camp Xia Pao 62. The Camp, they called it Site 32 and we also lived in Camp Site 339. Living on that side, there the Vietnamese soldier killed heavily [warfare was intense]. You don't know how much. Counting the times I shot and they shot, I have shot 28 times that I have killed, that I personally needed to shoot my gun. I have killed 11 Vietnamese that I individually killed. About the times they shot and I didn't, I didn't count [into the number of attacks]. Only the number of times that I shot. I have shot 28 times, according to what I remember.
- Interpreter: In our area, they called the site 32 and 339. That were the place that we had most fight in Laos.
- Hodge: This is a map reference. Is it, I mean the number refers to a map? Okay.
- Interpreter: Uh huh. He said that count all his fights. He has fight 28 times.
- Hodge: 28 battles. Open battles?
- Interpreter: Uh huh, open battles. And he count all the ones that he killed, 18 [people].
- Hodge: 18. Very good. Would he like to go back to Laos and kill some more?
- Interpreter: Have you thought about returning to Laos one day and engaging in war once more?
- Xiong: I have thought so. But from war until today, there is not one night that I have not dreamed about those days. I always dream about it all the time. There have been times where I have risen [in dream state], I have run into the wall or outside. About this, my thoughts are that if there is [war] I would go. But it seems that even though it has been 20 to 30 years since being a soldier, not one night I have passed that I have not dreamed and seen warfare. Maybe before I realize it, I have already run outside. If there is no noise/sound then you would have already ran and arisen no matter how deep asleep you are, you still get up.
- Interpreter: He said I would like to go back to fight. But after that war, it's about 30 years now, but almost every night I still dream about the war. Sometimes somebody noise, loud noise like something--
- Hodge: A firecracker or gun or something.

- Interpreter: During the night, he wake up and run away until he get outside and realize that this not where we fight, this is America. And now he still dream about that but he doesn't know why that happens.
- Hodge: In your field, this is called a flashback and it is very common. Happens to people and—Okay but, what happened? How long again did he fight? Until what day, you said in the '70s?
- Interpreter: '68 until '71.
- Hodge: '71, okay. Okay, oh '68 until 7-9. Yes, '79. Okay. This was all more or less in the same place?
- Interpreter: The war fighting mostly took place all in one region right? Where you lived?
- Xiong: Yes, the fighting was all in the region around where I lived.
- Interpreter: Yes, they were all in the same place.
- Hodge: Okay, what happened after 1979?
- Interpreter: After '79 what did you do?
- Xiong: After '79 I went to Thailand. January 9th, I arrived in Thailand.
- Interpreter: January 9th, '79 he got into Thailand.
- Hodge: How many people were with him? How did he cross the Mekong?
- Interpreter: How did you guys come into Thailand? And how did you cross the river?
- Xiong: Going to Thailand, at that time I did not have a wife yet. Going [to Thailand], we came as [a group of] six people. From the country [Laos], we left on December 13th and traveled and traveled for 28 days before we arrived in Thailand on January 9th. On the December 28th on the way there, the six of us traveled and traveled until reaching Thailand. And we split the bamboo trees and each of us rode one and swam across the river.
- Interpreter: December 78' around the 13th—December 13th of 78' they start heading to Thailand. They walked through the Jungle and they walked 28 days until they reach the Mekong River. And they cut bamboo and used the bamboo to swim over the Mekong River.
- Hodge: Underneath their arms or--? [Unintelligible]

- Xiong: Placing the bamboos under their arms.
- Hodge: Okay. And what happened when they got to Thailand?
- Interpreter: When you got to Thailand, what did you do?
- Xiong: Arriving in [the refugee camp] Thailand, I went back and helped the people there [in Laos] until '78. Since arriving in Thailand, I continuously traveled back and forth until '78. I mean '88. I decided not to go anymore. Year '89 I headed from Vinai, in '89 on May 18th I made the decision to come to the US. We came and lived in Pa Na Me Kong for an additional 5 to 6 months. In '90, December 18th we arrived in the US.
- Interpreter: When I got into the refugee camp, I still go back to Laos and tried to go back to help the people in Laos. I go back and forth many times.
- Hodge: What camp was it?
- Interpreter: What camp number was it?
- Xiong: Vinai.
- Hodge: Ban Vinai.
- Interpreter: So I go back and forth until '88 then I decide to come the United States.
- Hodge: Was he married by this time?
- Interpreter: Were you married at this time?
- Xiong: I got married in the year '80.
- Interpreter: He got married in 1980.
- Hodge: 1980. How many children does he have?
- Interpreter: How many kids do you have?
- Xiong: Seven kids.
- Interpreter: Seven.
- Hodge: Are they all in Oshkosh?
- Interpreter: Are all of them living in Oshkosh?

Xiong: Yes.

Hodge: Okay. When did he come to this country?

Interpreter: When did you come to this country?

Xiong: On the 18th. December 18th, 1990.

Interpreter: December 18th--

Hodge: Okay. December 18th 1990. Okay. Was this direct to Oshkosh?

Interpreter: Did you come straight to Oshkosh?

Hodge: Did his whole family? You have not lived in other places?

Interpreter: Did your whole family and you come directly to Oshkosh? Have you guys lived anywhere else?

Xiong: No.

Interpreter: Only in Oshkosh here.

Hodge: Does he like Oshkosh cold weather?

Interpreter: Do you like the cold wind in Oshkosh?

Xiong: I like it. I like this city a lot and that's why I don't move because I have a lot of my relatives here.

Interpreter: Yes, I like the weather, I like this town and all my relatives live in this town.

Hodge: Does he garden?

Interpreter: Do you farm vegetables and stuff like that?

Xiong: Yes, I do a little.

Interpreter: Yes.

Hodge: Tell him I garden, I have different twenty different kinds of herbs. If he or his family ever want any, they can come to him to come to my house. You know where I live of course. I give a whole bunch of herbs.

- Interpreter: Okay. He said that he also gardens vegetables and has some twenty kinds of Hmong herbs. If you Hmong ever want use any, go to his house and he will give you guys some to use. Green medicine and stuff like that, that he grows.
- Xiong: Thank you. Thank you for him keeping things like that. If didn't know we wouldn't go, but since we know if we need stuff, we will go ask for his help.
- Interpreter: When he need herbal medicine he will come to check to see if you have it.
- Hodge: Okay. American Indians also do the same things
- Interpreter: The Americans Indians also plant medicines like Hmong people too. Do you have his address?
- Xiong: No, I don't.
- Interpreter: He would like you to write your address so he can stop by sometime.
- Hodge: Okay. Yes. Tell him, call first to make sure I am there.
- Interpreter: Before you go, call ahead to make sure he is home, so you don't waste time.
- Hodge: My wife keeps me very busy, working hard all the time.
- Interpreter: His wife tells to him to do a lot of stuff.

[End of Interview]