

**Samnom Mao Chan**

Interview Date:

Location of interview:

Interview conducted by Amanda Miller and Tobin Rothlein/miro

Tobin Rothlein: Well, start by we want you to introduce yourself. So if you could tell us your name and what your business is and where it's located and how long you've been here.

Samnom Mao Chan: Okay, I am Mr. Samnom Mao Chan. I am the husband of my wife. My wife worked permanently. Her name is Namno. And this location is located at the – let me see the address exactly. This is 1301 Mifflin Street, Philadelphia, PA 19148. Yeah, and I start business here late 2000 – yeah, late 2000 I start business here. And when I begin to start, I sit over there three day watch the people pass by. And after that, I come into the bank because the bank will have a lot of suspects why this man has sitting three day outside. But I saw very few people pass by. I don't like this place. But after I come in, I saw that many people pass by a lot. And my business is going on until now.

Amanda Miller: Was there a booth here before?

Samnom Mao Chan: What is it?

Amanda Miller: Is this the first booth that's been here? Or was there something here before?

Samnom Mao Chan: This newsstand, yeah, before, yeah, but I met the owner of the newsstand. He told me his story like this. There was a pond around here. There is a pond in which the horses came and drink the water there. Yeah, this is one of the old people who came and tell me.

Amanda Miller: Okay.

Tobin Rothlein: Was it a newsstand before?

Samnom Mao Chan: Before, I don't know exactly. But the owner of the newsstand, he told me that.

Tobin Rothlein: Where was the owner from?

- Samnom Mao Chan: Oh, I don't know. But he stay in this area I know.
- Amanda Miller: Okay, okay.
- Tobin Rothlein: And did you live in this area?
- Samnom Mao Chan: I live in North Philadelphia.
- Tobin Rothlein: And when did you first come to America?
- Samnom Mao Chan: I first come in 1985. So 1985 until now.
- Tobin Rothlein: Did you have a newsstand in another location before here?
- Samnom Mao Chan: No, no, I don't have.
- Amanda Miller: What made you decide to come down here to look at this location? Why did you come and spend three days?
- Samnom Mao Chan: Oh, yeah. No, when I stay, I try to find a job. I go many places to find a job. I go to look at the grocery and every place. And finally I heard the phone call. I try to catch the phone. And I respond to them. And I don't agree to come here at that time. I go to meditation class for ten day. And after that, I heard the phone again. And so I try. And I pray, God, please help me. And finally I got this place and now love very much. Just sold this business – we continue our life. My family can go on. Even though some difficulty that we met.
- But we can pay the bill. We can have the food to eat. We are peaceful. Anyway, our business, like the other business as a whole – we meet some economy crisis. Now the business slow down and the people spend less and less. But we tried. So why – yes, I will sell like this.
- Tobin Rothlein: Do you have children also?
- Samnom Mao Chan: Oh, yeah, I have one daughter. She has her own business. Now I work for my support only. I'm lucky because at my age, if I have children to support, it is difficult. But I'm lucky.

- Tobin Rothlein: What is your age?
- Samnom Mao Chan: My age – March 31, 1952. But in my country, we always lower our age because we add age to go to school. That is why we lower – my real age right now is 63.
- Amanda Miller: And if you were back in your home country, how old would you say you were?
- Samnom Mao Chan: What?
- Amanda Miller: If you were back home, how old would you say –
- Samnom Mao Chan: What do you mean?
- Amanda Miller: Here you say I'm 63. But there, would you say I'm 63? Or would you say I am –
- Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah, over there –
- Amanda Miller: 54.
- Samnom Mao Chan: 54, yeah, yeah.
- Tobin Rothlein: What would you say you sell the most from your newsstand? What is the top seller?
- Samnom Mao Chan: The most important is this one – lottery.
- Amanda Miller: The lottery.
- Samnom Mao Chan: Lottery is more. And the other is – if it's not necessary – yeah, the lottery.
- Tobin Rothlein: How many lottery tickets a day?
- Samnom Mao Chan: Oh, the lottery, every day, it depend. Now there are a lot of competition right now. Because when we are around here first, there are very few place. But now more and more place, yeah. That is why our income down because of competition, yeah.
- Tobin Rothlein: Do you make lots of friends in the neighborhood?

Samnom Mao Chan: Oh, yeah, yeah. Yes, I feel very comfortable because of friend. And in this country, we feel that – before when I come here, there are culture difficulty too because I don't understand well how the people feel. Yeah, how I am feeling – what my feeling.

Tobin Rothlein: Can you repeat that?

Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah, yeah, no problem. You take your time.

Tobin Rothlein: No, no, it's okay. I'll turn my phone off.

Samnom Mao Chan: We have some difficulty in culture. We have some person who tried to break in by the side at the night. But we have a lot of friend of people around here call the police.

Tobin Rothlein: They tried to fit in. It's a very small, little air vent. Very small.

Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah, but around ten year here – we are safe. We have a lot of friends.

Tobin Rothlein: When you first came here, was there many Cambodian people here? Or were you the first Cambodian people that a lot of the neighborhood ever met?

Samnom Mao Chan: Few Cambodian around here – only around the Snyder and Eighth Street. Those are the Cambodian. But here this is Italian people in general. And they are very, very nice. Very few people bad. But very nice, the majority – I love, yeah.

Tobin Rothlein: We'd like to hear about your journey from Cambodia to Philadelphia. What was that like? And how did you end up here in Philadelphia of all the places you could end up in the world?

Samnom Mao Chan: I, myself, work in my country as the official of the government over there. But over there, I was in Pol Pot time – you know – the genocide regime.

Tobin Rothlein: Yeah.

Samnom Mao Chan: In Cambodia, I was a student of Faculty of Commerce at that time. But my years haven't finished yet. I'm enlist four year. But I have finished only third year. And the Pol Pot come into – and I was chased out of the city of Phnom Penh to the countryside. My family almost all die. But now I have my mom in Phnom Penh. And when I come back from the Pol Pot regime, I return to Phnom Penh. And I worked in the government of Cambodia.

Tobin Rothlein: So were you in one of the camps?

Samnom Mao Chan: What?

Tobin Rothlein: You first had to leave Phnom Penh because the Khmer come to power.

Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah.

Tobin Rothlein: Did you stay in the countryside? Or did you leave Cambodia to one of the refugee camps?

Samnom Mao Chan: No, I stay inside of the country. I worked for the government over there. And luckily, the government appoint me to work in Washington, D.C. Over there for five – four years. And after the mission, my son, my daughter – and my daughter got married. And I like America. I love very much the freedom. I love very much the life – civilized country like America. And so I decide to stay here. And I see clearly that America is the country of opportunity. Ten years have passed. My life is going on. We need to be honest. We need to respect the law – some condition like that.

I find out that we need to hard work, to be conscious in our work, to be honest, to respect the law and everything. We don't have any conflict. Our lives are going on. Yeah, even those –

Tobin Rothlein: So you were very lucky. You were a student. And you were still able to get a job in the government.

Samnom Mao Chan: Oh, no, no –

Amanda Miller: During Pol Pot, he was in the country.

- Tobin Rothlein: So you hid in the countryside.
- Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah, I was in the countryside. Yeah, working hard at that time, yeah, working hard. But after the Pol Pot time, I was alive.
- Amanda Miller: Yeah, which is amazing.
- Samnom Mao Chan: I come back to Phnom Penh.
- Amanda Miller: And you found your mother?
- Unknown Speaker: Hello.
- Samnom Mao Chan: Sorry – for this time – just an interview.
- Tobin Rothlein: Do you wanna take a break?
- Samnom Mao Chan: No, no, no, just finish.
- Tobin Rothlein: Okay.
- Amanda Miller: So you came to Washington in 1985.
- Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah, 1985.
- Amanda Miller: To work for the Cambodian government in D.C.
- Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah.
- Amanda Miller: And then you stayed five years. And how did you come to Philadelphia?
- Samnom Mao Chan: Oh, my son-in-law here in Philadelphia. That is why he got married. And I start to stay here. And you see, my dream – I was in Phnom Penh. After the Pol Pot time, I came back to Phnom Penh. I saw the map of America. I have a dream. I feel alive, very much whole. This is the freedom come back again – my country, you see. Oh, yeah. And now I am here in America. I enjoy freedom – democracy freedom.
- Tobin Rothlein: What was your job in D.C., a diplomat?

Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah, as diplomat over there.

Amanda Miller: So are there things from your life in Cambodia that you brought with you and that you pass onto your children and their children?

Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah, yeah. With my children, I have something to leave to her. But here, it is not the same as in Cambodia. In Cambodia, the family have authority into the children. But here, the children – no, they have the freedom to choose their own destiny. And now I change the mentality. I conform with the way of life –

Amanda Miller: Here.

Samnom Mao Chan: – and I know. But what I enjoy very much in America – I found the spirituality of life. This is the most important thing that I saw is this meditation. I can relax any time. If I want to relax, I just sit down and meditate maybe 15 minute. All the systems slow down – calm down. And it is energize like a battery charge. Yes, very nice.

Tobin Rothlein: Do you go to a certain temple here for meditation or on your own practice?

Samnom Mao Chan: On my own. Now there is a program they call Vipassana meditation, all over America, in Massachusetts, in Texas, Washington State. Techniques is very wonderful. I never know that. The people in my country have different conception of meditation. They say meditation is a kind of engagement into the religion practice. And so they are afraid of meditation. But the meditation is not like they view. The meditation is a technique, how to relax, relax our minds and our body. And if we reach that technique, we can live two worlds. One world is thinking, expressing, feeling. And another world, we relax.

So now I have two room already. One room is for – like, now, I am working. I am talking, reacting, everything. But when I want to relax, I just use that technique. And I relax. And this is wonderful.

Tobin Rothlein: Where did you learn to –

Samnom Mao Chan: Oh, in America.

Tobin Rothlein: You went someplace here in Philadelphia to learn?

Samnom Mao Chan: No, I went to Texas – ten day over there. And after that I go to Massachusetts – ten day, two times more. And now I get up all the techniques. My wife too, we –

Amanda Miller: She does that too?

Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah, so some people who came here – watch her to sit and she close her eye. And the customer knocks the door. And she open – oh, yeah, yeah. This is the wonderful thing that I found in America. And I want my daughter to get access to that too.

Tobin Rothlein: I wanna get access too.

Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah, wonderful, wonderful.

Tobin Rothlein: Is it based in Indian?

Samnom Mao Chan: There are many kinds of meditation in the world. But myself – this is Buddhism.

Amanda Miller: Buddhism.

Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah, it is basically if you want to know what is it. Basically, is that my mind here – I was thinking here. Go on and on, 24-hour, you cannot close it. You cannot close it. All the scientists say that 60,000 thoughts goes through your mind in 24-hour. You cannot close down. And when one mind come, the reaction go on. And the reaction go on. All the system of your body go on too. You use your energy any time. You open your eye until you close your eye. Even at night, you continue to dream. When you dream, the memory continue to use too. And a lot of dream early in the morning, you get exhausted.

But meditation, you can stop that movement. And how to stop it, I tell you the basic – how to stop that movement of thinking. To stop, there are two key: One is to concentrate on the breath, yeah. Ask you to practice to concentrate.

Because the more you concentrate, the more space you have. Inside of you there is a space. And this is the first key that you go to practice. The second key is to watch your body sensation. When you feel tired, you watch your body sensation from top of the head and to the foot and come up and down, up and down. You are out of your brain **[inaudible]**. This is very key.

And you know that people pray. Why do people pray? Praying is stopping your head too because praying is surrendering because the key question, how to surrender your ego, your mind, your ego – how to surrender. When I pray, I surrender to you. I believe in you. At that time you go slow, slow down, and slow down. And finally, you stop. That is why the religion people use that technique, to stop. In this world, we are so rational. We believe in logic. But the logic is one part of our capacity as human being only. There are another part – irrational. So meditation –

Tobin Rothlein: I just wanna make sure it's still working.

Samnom Mao Chan: So meditation is a way – how to live in this world in the rational way that's made in logic. Yeah, this is what I say, you just hear. But if you want to know, you try to practice yourself.

Tobin Rothlein: You should do a meditation class.

Samnom Mao Chan: Oh, I have given the meditation class to the library three years ago. Yeah, I gave to them. And I wrote some speech in my Cambodian paper here.

Amanda Miller: Do you interact with the Cambodian community in Philadelphia a lot? Do you spend a lot of time?

Samnom Mao Chan: I have not a lot of time. Yeah, I come to work. And I come back. I come to work. I come back. And at home, I have a lot of job to do and so on. Sometime I go to the temple.

Tobin Rothlein: **[inaudible]** in Cambodia now.

Samnom Mao Chan: Oh, you work in –

- Tobin Rothlein: Doing an art project.
- Amanda Miller: With a dance company.
- Tobin Rothlein: With a dance company in Phnom Penh – very famous dance company. They’re coming to the U.S. In October they’ll be here. They do a show. They do a big performance here and workshops that are **[inaudible]**. We do workshops teaching dancers in Philadelphia. And they learn about the dance in Cambodia.
- Samnom Mao Chan: That’s wonderful. Yeah, this is good for the Cambodian youth here too to attract to – to enjoy dance and their culture – reliving that culture to –
- Tobin Rothlein: That leads me to my next question. When in your journey to come to here – to Philadelphia – to America – what culturally was most important for you to keep with you – to take with you from the time you left Phnom Penh?
- Samnom Mao Chan: From Cambodia?
- Tobin Rothlein: Yeah, what’s the most important part of being Cambodian?
- Samnom Mao Chan: I don’t understand well the question.
- Tobin Rothlein: Your culture as a Cambodian. When we’ve talked to many different people who have come here from many different places, we always ask what is it that you as a family made sure to keep from that place? Some people it’s food. Some people it’s a song. Some people it’s events. Some people it’s –
- Amanda Miller: Something that you share with your family and they share with their family.
- Tobin Rothlein: Especially when you’re with your daughter – spend more time here.
- Samnom Mao Chan: You know Buddhism is one of the most important religion in Cambodia. And in Cambodia, we practice Buddhism according to the ritual. But we don’t know the game behind that thing. We don’t know. And when I come here, vision show me clearly that there is something inside that

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we can use in this world. That is why I, myself, I write some article in the paper – Cambodian paper to show them that this is very valuable. Buddhism, this is the one of my favorite. And I want to tell the people – Cambodian too.

Tobin Rothlein: So you discovered the spirituality in your religion by leaving Cambodia?

Samnom Mao Chan: That's right.

Tobin Rothlein: You found the spirituality in America.

Samnom Mao Chan: That right. That right. This is why I can – found it. One is I practice myself. I come and sit under the guidance of the teacher. When I leave the school – I leave the center, I try to meditate. Yeah, something happen in myself. I wonder what is it just to watch the breath, just to look at the body sensation in work. I can release stress. I can think better than before. I have positive feeling more than before. What happened to me? That is why I start to read book. I start to look at the book. Luckily, in America is the best place that the book is accessible to the people.

This is wonderful. I am here. I go to the bookshop. I go to the library. And we have a lot of opportunity to open that area that I want to see. And finally, now I found. And besides that, now the technology, like, Internet, I search from that. I listen – the hearing from the high speech of the other people. And this make my confident more clearly.

Tobin Rothlein: What book is this that you refer to – the book?

Samnom Mao Chan: The best book in America is *The Power of Now* – the best. It worked wonderfully with the modern people. Yes, I recommend many people around. The most important thing is practice. If you just read and oh, it is there! Yeah, yeah, yeah. But you don't try to practice it, you don't get anything. I can say that in this world, there are two kinds of religion: One religion is the expression of religion. Another one is experience religion. What is the expression religion? The expression of religion – for example – you have your parent to concentrate on Christianity – for example. You read the book and you just hear.

And you practice normally. But you don't have the experience inside. You just follow your parent. But another state, when you practice and you finally experience peace inside you, you start to see the true. Yeah, this is essential. So there are two kinds of religion. Expression religion – that is why the religion in the world fight to each other. They say my religion is the best. Another religion – mine is the best. Everybody fight to each other. But all Buddha – God in Hinduism, the free spirit in American Indian, Tao in Chinese. All of those say the same thing.

When you practice, you reach to the core of experience. Finally you see all religion the same. I respect all religion.

Tobin Rothlein: I think you're very eloquent in English.

Samnom Mao Chan: Oh, only some. But sometime I cannot express the whole ideas.

Tobin Rothlein: **[inaudible]** When did you first feel that America was your home?

Samnom Mao Chan: The more I stay here, the more I have friends or American friend. Or the more I stay – being home. And now I don't even want to be back. I just want to send some new idea that I got here to my friend over there, to tell that look, this is the world. We are there in the small box – see all religion like me. But I would like to open your mind that religion, like, we practice in our home, is in the small box only. And here, we can open it. And now I feel being home in America. And I hope the future of my daughter – I have now two granddaughters – is wonderful in this country.

Tobin Rothlein: Are they all here in Philadelphia?

Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and my son-in-law too.

Tobin Rothlein: And then my other question is during the time in the Cambodian countryside, were you doing any labor?

Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah. Because of Pol Pot has a wrong conception about developing a country. I can say at that time there is socialism and capitalism. Socialism, they say everything is

equal. They say everything is equal. So we make our country into equal – everybody is equal. That is why they chased all the people from the city and transform all the student – every classes of people to work as a farmer. They say if we have right, we have everything. This is the wrong conception. In that time because of the wrong conception, the countries were damaged.

But now the people come back. And everybody have their specific talent to do the job – some by brain, some by hand. And we, all together, to stand up in one machine and move Cambodian on up.

Amanda Miller: Is there anything that you wanna add?

**[Break in tape]**

Amanda Miller: Okay.

Tobin Rothlein: I think we want so set – yeah, is there anything else that you want to say?

Samnom Mao Chan: No. I just say the same. I thanks to my place, thanks to my friends, thanks to the policemen, thanks to the city, yeah. Thanks to the United State of America, thanks all America to allow me to have a good life here. This is what I want to say.

Tobin Rothlein: I'm going to stop.

Samnom Mao Chan: Twenty kilometer, around fifty miles from Phnom Penh, I stayed there.

Tobin Rothlein: South or north?

Samnom Mao Chan: North, I'm sorry, east. East of Phnom Penh.

Tobin Rothlein: That's where you were when you left Phnom Penh, east of Phnom Penh?

Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah.

Tobin Rothlein: And when did you learn English?

Samnom Mao Chan: Oh, I learn English from when I was in college, yeah, in English only. I was lucky to be with a good teacher of English. Good pronunciation. I learned phonetic symbol very clearly. I love American very much, English very much. When I learned in Cambodia, all is in French. Yeah. All is in French. And when I come to university in French, too. English is small part. And in the time, I saw one what the call English for Today. I tried to read it, but I don't understand well. And when the time finish, I stopped to read, and I tried to remember what the teacher told me. And at that time, the old book was bought in Phnom Penh, and I tried to gather all the material, and I have enough to teach the student over there.

Yeah. I teach only the first and the second books only, I teach. And after that, I improve myself the English. And America, I learned from Special English. I listen the story from Special English that every night, one hour. I appreciate that program very much.

Tobin Rothlein: This is a radio program?

Samnom Mao Chan: A radio program from America that called Special English.

Tobin Rothlein: Oh. And it plays in other countries?

Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah. They play in Cambodia. I listen every day, and they accent very nice. And but I don't have enough luck to have a formal education in English over there.

Amanda Miller: So you were in the university for three years, and then you went to the country. When you came back to the city, you began teaching in the university?

Samnom Mao Chan: No. I just teach the English because at that time, nobody know the English. Yeah. At that time, somebody know, but very few people know English.

Amanda Miller: And you had already had some.

Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah. I had some, so I tried to learn. And also, at that time, I can live on my knowledge of English, too. I can get some income from that, too, but not a big one. But just some of the people, some make clothes for me, some bring – but

myself, I enjoyed to research myself. I improve myself through the old book. Yeah. One day, I saw in the paper that if you want to learn English, you look at the text from Australia. I lie. I send a letter to them, and they send me the whole book. And yeah, that improved my English. But what I thank very much is Special English from America in Cambodia. And right now, I listen to radio.

Right now, America improve **[inaudible]**, of English in Cambodia. I'm very happy for the Cambodian over there to enjoy, especially our country now to open, not to be very restricted and be neither globalization, continue to come into the country. We belong to Asian country, and also the international come in and English absolutely necessary for Cambodia.

Tobin Rothlein: Is your mother still in Phnom Penh?

Samnom Mao Chan: She's still in outside of Phnom Penh, yeah. She still, she is old, maybe 85 years old already.

Tobin Rothlein: Do you go back to visit?

Samnom Mao Chan: Yes. I decide to go back because she is too old. Every night, I pray God to help her to be alive so that I can – I feel grateful to her to support my life. The gratitude is always there. Now, this is the gratitude to America, to American people, to everybody who help us to be alive here.

Tobin Rothlein: What's your favorite – this is a different topic and it will be the last question.

Amanda Miller: No, that's fine.

Tobin Rothlein: What is the Cambodian food? Do you still prepare Cambodian food here now at home?

Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah. Now, when I have time to prepare Cambodian food. The reason because we are familiar with our food. We have good taste with that food. And from time to time, I go to **[inaudible]**.

Tobin Rothlein: Those are the restaurants down –

- Amanda Miller: McDonald's and Popeye's.
- Tobin Rothlein: Oh. McDonald's and Popeye's. Oh no.
- Samnom Mao Chan: I go there.
- Tobin Rothlein: That's not so good.
- Samnom Mao Chan: Yeah. I love my food, but it make the energy because we are exhausted from the –
- Amanda Miller: Yeah.
- Samnom Mao Chan: My food is special. I know that the people who eat my food have less cholesterol than to eat the food here. And if the girl weight, no problem of increased weight. But my daughter, especially, she is normal. She eat Cambodian food that's good.
- Tobin Rothlein: We love the Cambodian food, but we couldn't find it here.
- Amanda Miller: We have to go down to –
- Tobin Rothlein: Not even. Wait, we tried to find **[inaudible]**.
- Samnom Mao Chan: I don't know. Cambodian food is hard to find here. Myself, too, yeah, it's hard. Many American ask me about that.
- Amanda Miller: So did you teach your daughter how to make Cambodian food?
- Samnom Mao Chan: No. My wife does.
- Amanda Miller: And does your daughter now make Cambodian food for her daughters?
- Samnom Mao Chan: Yes. She learned from us, and she can do. But my granddaughter continue to have the tendency to eat American food now.
- Tobin Rothlein: Uh-oh.

Samnom Mao Chan: In the home, **[inaudible]**, she say oh, I don't like that. I ask my daughter please let her taste, let her taste, but the children start to change the taste. So I accept the way she is. This is [wind in mic]. We should control only some part, and the other part, you let them learn. And we respect that.

Tobin Rothlein: That's a perfect place to end. Thank you very much.

**[End of interview]**