Background:
Ngoc Huan Le was born in Vietnam in 1976. He did not stay there long, because due to the political turmoil that had engulfed the country at that point in time, his family fled to the United States. His father and mother arrived separately and he arrived with his father and uncle in Seattle, in 1980. Mr. Le eventually made his way to Houston, TX, going to college, studying scientific disciplines, but eventually he went on to get a graduate degree in law. At the same time, Huan’s parents had taken control of a grocery store and were working two jobs to put Huan through college. Since obtaining his law degree, Huan has now moved into business, where he is part of a company that has operations in several countries including the US, China and Vietnam. Huan actively participates in Vietnamese organizations in Houston and is a member of the Asia Society Young Professionals’ Council.

Setting:
The interview centers on the personal experience of Huan coming to and assimilating in American culture. Through his personal experience, the interview moves towards a more macro view, giving attention to forces that govern the mindset and behavior of Asian Americans in society today. The interview took place at Huan’s favorite breakfast place, Tiny’s No. 5 in the West U area in Houston. The interview lasted just over an hour. Huan gave us a good idea of some of his experiences growing up in Houston and acclimatizing to society as well as marrying into a culture outside of his own. Huan spoke confidently and had a fantastic memory of his childhood and I am pleased to share his story with the archive.

Interview Transcript Key:
HL: Ngoc Huan Le (HL)
AJ: Ameer Jumabhoy (AJ)
SC: Sarah Craig (SC)
…: pauses
—: speech cuts off
[]: Actions

AJ: We good to go?

SC: We are indeed.

AJ: All right. Well Huan, thank you so much for meeting us. Uh. Um Well right now we’re doing this program called the Houston Asian American Archives and it aims to profile um, first generation immigrants who have moved to the United States from Asian countries and basically we want to talk about experiences, how you’ve grown up in the U.S., what your experiences
have been like since you were young. Um, so I guess the first question we’d probably want to ask you is, what got your family to move to the United States in the 80s from what we understand?

HL: Um, so, the country fell in 1975, I was born in ’76, and um at the time Vietnam was very poor uh and the–they didn’t see any hope for uh, a future there so they tried to escape a couple of times and uh, finally succeeded in ’79 so.

AJ: And h–h–how did your family escape cos we’ve studied um, you know, different families coming by plane, by ship um, by boat. H–h–what’s the story?

HL: So we were–we were very much the boat people.

AJ: Okay.

HL: So ’75 they tried to leave once.

AJ: Mhm

HL: Uh with a group of folks but that didn’t work and then in about ’70 uh 7-’78 –they tried—’78 they tried to leave again uh, um by boat, but were caught and then in ’79 uh w–we left separately so myself and my dad and then a few months later my mom and my sister left.

AJ: And do you have any recollections of the journey here at all?

HL: Uh, only t—only very small fragments, I remember um, uh, I remember uh being, the boat eventually landed and it got to an island and it was rocky, out in the sea it was pretty rocky and so the captain had driven the boat into the rocks and s–so it started to sink.

AJ: Wow! [laughs]

HL: S–so my dad threw me over the boat to my uncle who was already in the water, so I remember that and I–I vaguely remember uh, parts of when we were in the boat, but that’s about it.


HL: Probably ’79-‘80. Probably ’80.


HL: Seattle.

AJ: And what was the journey like to get to Tex—you came to Texas after that?
HL: We did so uh, Seattle, we went to Seattle because that was where our sponsor was. Uh it was a church, sponsored my family and we were in Seattle for a year and a half, two years um, my dad uh. So when you’re a refugee, you’re allowed so many uh months of welfare essentially so that r–and when that ran out we had t–had to go find a real proper job. Left school, he had some friends in Houston we drove uh from Seattle to Houston in a Mustang with no air conditioning.

AJ: [Laughs]

HL: That actually eventually broke down.

AJ: Wow. And I guess then your formative years growing up, you grew up technically as an American then because you must have come to Houston when you were four to five years old.

HL: Yeah, when I was in Houston I was uh six-seven, six years old?

AJ: And that was a very conservative time, when Texas was not as, it’s still not very liberal but perhaps it’s–it’s less liberal during the time you came here. So what was it like coming from a completely different land, as, you know, a child and you know assimilating into the culture of Texas and the United States?

HL: You know, when you’r—when you’re that young, you don’t notice that you’re different. So, so that’s one thing. Uh and then things that—so the first thing is that you don’t notice you’re different. So I’ll give you an example. Uh I saw our–my first movie when I was in Seattle. I probably didn’t go see another movie until I was at least twelve or thirteen, but it never dawned on me that that was somehow different uh or uh.

SC: Do you remember what movie it was?

HL: Well the first movie was James Bond so I remember that. Uh or, I’ll give you another example it’s that like when you’re an immigrant uh things like, after school sports are–are unknown to the parents so you’re not encouraged to do those things so it never o–occurred to me that maybe I wanted to or maybe I didn’t… right? Um or the fact that you speak a different language in the house is not–it w—wasn’t different, y—you didn’t think of it as different because that’s just the way it was.

AJ: So it was normal life for you to be kind of Vietnamese, very culturally Vietnamese at home and culturally very American outside of the house.

HL: Right, right.

AJ: Okay.

SC: Was there ever a point where you realized that like other kids in your class spoke, like, was there like a point when you realized that there was…
HL: Yeah probably right before high school or maybe during high school it—it became very obvious that, that it was different. You know? Like expectations are different right. So, uh some of my—some of the folks I went to high school with, the expectation was, uh you know, hopefully they’ll graduate from high school and—and if they’re lucky they’ll go to college and that was not the expectation in the house. The—the expectation in the house was uh what graduate degree are you going to get? [Laughs]

AJ: Yeah, I—I can completely identify with that being from an Indian family myself.

HL: Right.

AJ: And so you went to college and you studied international relations, is that, did you study international relations because you were interested in it or was it because you wanted to kind of understand the world in general?

HL: Well, so, I was a Biology major as well so I majored in Biology because I had thought… that I agreed with my parents that I wanted to be a doctor. Uh turns out I—uh that I was wrong. So I uh majored in Biology uh but I always knew that I wanted to do something uh more macro, where—if you think about it, you know, medicine is very micro, if that makes sense right? One-on-one interactions, one person at a time whereas I—my interests were more in macro, so I thought international relations was a good way to look at that thing, yeah. And I thought it would be fun so I did—I did international relations.

AJ: And then from then you went to law school.

HL: Yup.

AJ: So that’s another shift. You did medicine with your biology degree.

HL: Mhm.

AJ: Politics in your international relations degree and then law school…

HL: Yup.

AJ: For your law degree. So that must have been like a very interesting time for you as well, no?

HL: Well I was—I went to law school to hide out ‘cause I didn’t know what I wanted to do and I—W—Here’s the problem, being Asian, when I went home to tell my parents I’m not going to medical school, you can’t say I’m not going to medical school. You have to say, instead I’m going to—and you pick something right? And the only thing I had done to—that would get me into graduate school was I had taken the LSAT uh not because I thought I was going to law school but because my roommate and I were trying to figure out who was the better test taker. [AJ and SC laugh] So… I had the LSAT in my back pocket so I told my dad that I was going to law school. Uh…
AJ: And was that accepted at home as–as a career path for a Vietnamese kid to say ‘Oh I’m not going to medical school but I’m changing completely my focus to law?’

HL: Oh well they were clearly disappointed because I–w–when I went to USC I had gotten a uh… it’s a–it’s a program called baccalaureate-MD to–and you’re admitted to both the undergraduate and graduate school at the same time and so, in their head it was guaranteed that I would go into medical school and so uh to say you are not is going to be a disappointment.

SC: Yeah Ameer is…

AJ: Yeah I’ve got my… (?)

SC: It ran out of battery.

AJ: See, I’ve still got it on. Uhm… I was just losing my train of thought, uhm… okay so then you finished law school, and you got a law degree now, and from then I saw from your bio that you got involved with so many different societies. You’re involved in the Asian Society, Young Professionals Asia Society as an entity, uh you’re in leadership positions, what made you want to join a society like the Asia Society that acts as a bridge between the West and the East. Is that from, h–you know, is it something cultural, that you wanted to get involved in because of your heritage?

HL: Uh no, it—uh so a–after law school I went to uh, uh Loughton, Texas, to work at a law firm

AJ: Mhm.

HL: And uhm, I got engaged and w–with my wife and the deal was wherever we both wound up we would go or live there because we were living at different cities at the time. So we both wound up in Houston and so I–I came back to Houston. And I came back to Houston, I knew I wanted to uh, get involved, and my interest in Houston has always been about making it a better place to live.

AJ: Right.

HL: At the time, uhm, Asia Society, uh, had said that they were going to build this new building in the Museum District called the Asia House at the time and they had some uh renderings up so I called and asked, you know, well this is pretty neat, how do you get involved? So that was really how I got involved in Asia Society and uh, but it–you know I got lucky in the sense because it also happened to be an Asian focused uhm… uh non-profit so, I got involved more in–in the involved in the world wide Asia community, actually more with the worldwide Asia community than the local, in fact.

AJ: And do you think that a lot of people um who join an entity like the Asia Society, do you feel that they have a similar focus to you or do you feel like they’re placing themselves in different spaces on the spectrum being an Asian in Houston or an Asian immigrant in Houston?
HL: I think Asia Society is unique in that it’s not necessarily an Asian cultural organization uh, it’s—I think of it more as a uh, Asia, uh Asia gateway organization, meaning, again it’s that micro versus macro right? So it—it looks more outwards at the rest of Asia than inwards on Asian American uh as—as a, as something to uh t—concentrate on.

AJ: And I know you’ve gotten involved um and I think we’ve met at several Vietnamese Association functions like th–there was a party at Versace and we met there for a non-profit, for refugees as well. Uh, have you found yourself getting more involved in the Vietnamese organizations? ‘Cause it’s an interesting concept that uh, you have so many individual ethnic enclaves you know, the Indians have the Network of Indian Professionals and the V—the Vietnamese have their own associations and these are all kind of popping up all over the place. Uh, as somebody from Vietnamese descent, what do you think about these organizations and do you find yourself having been participating more in them?

HL: Uhm, no, I—I—I don’t, I try to… I try to get involved in the—those kinds of associations but uh, but it’s very… it’s—it’s a little bit difficult for me because uh… w—well two things, one is that my Vietnamese isn’t as good as it probably should be. And two, uh the things that they do don’t really interest me [laughs] right? I mean, w—what’s an example, uh… so, there are some groups that are doing some great work with various things, so f—for example, there’s an organization called the HOPE initiative and basically it’s helping orphanages in—in Vietnam that’s great work uh, but there’s a lot of things that go into that and I’m not very good at the—the things they need to do—people to do to make that work very well. Uhm, there’s another organization that helps, uh th–there are Vietnamese boat people now, who are still refugees in places like Hong Kong and various other places so they do a lot of work to help those r–refugees uh, again, my skills don’t match what they need uh, so I’m—it’s hard for me to get involved in those organization other than to provide you know, financial support, moral support and go to their events and th—that kind of thing but to actually be involved and be inside helping is—is not something I’m very good at. [12:25]

AJ: Now again, I’m going to go back to these, these ideas of these ethnic communities, it’s—it’s interesting because within these communities there’s definitely a hierarchy where people are very popular and can appeal to people within their communities but why do you feel like in the spaces of sports, in terms of politics, we don’t see Asian Americans represented as they should be because you see a lot of them going into medicine, into law and they’re doing great but we see very few people like Jeremy Lin, see very—very few people uh like uh Gary Locke, who have uh you know, really gotten mainstream appeal, w—why do you think that is?

HL: I—I think i—it’s because well, if I had to guess, I would guess that uh… the history of the… uh… a lot of Asian immigrants are refugees of one sort or another, right uh, and I think it’s a—it’s a very similar problem to, uh to some H—Hispanic groups in that when you’re a refugee of a—an economic refugee or political refugee or some sort of refugee, it implies that—that you had to overcome devastating economic hardship, right? And so you’re ability to take risks is much reduced. Uh, because… it’s more important to have a safe economic future than to take a risk on a political future, take a risk into trying to get into that MBA or take a risk in, and, uh you know, do these low percentage success kind of things.
AJ: But do you—do you think that, that’s a, uh, um it’s kind of like a psychological thing because you know, when, when Obama got elected as President, he came from a nothing background, he never had any money or any support but he was able to get mainstream appeal and be you know one of the first, well, the first African-American man to get to the Presidency and he got that appeal, he got young people involved from all sorts of ethnicities, do you—what steps do you think Asian American uh immigrants a—and communities in places like the United States can do if they want to be able to get fully accepted and get that mainstream appeal?

HL: I—I think that uh, Asian Americans can get that mainstream appeal, if they want to. Uh, I don’t, I don’t think there’s anything unique or special we have to do. I think it’s just a—a matter of uh, how many people want to. Right? I mean, Houston for example you have uh, you have uh Gordon Quan, who was City Council Member, uh you now have um another City Council Member, I forgot his name, but a Vietnamese man, and… I—I don’t think that their pathway to—to political success was much different than anybody else. I—I think—you just don’t think you see as many, not because we’re not successful because there aren’t as many th—who want to do it. And I think that’s slowly changing, uh, with, uh, people… that have been here for a very long time, three, four decades kind of thing, or families who have been here for three-four decades.

AJ: Okay. If I could just move back to the personal, uhm, and I’m hoping that this is not too personal but you know, uh, I met your wife, she’s a lovely lady but she’s Indian, that’s very interesting for me and for our class um because we’ve never seen a Vietnamese— Indian union which, I’ve—I’ve personally never seen before uhm, but you guys are very much in love, you know, very happy together. What was it like telling your parents for example that you know, Mum, Dad, I’m engaged to an Indian lady or I want to marry an Indian lady? What was that like?

HL: So that—that was interesting [laughs] but it was int—my first girlfriend was Indian… and um my last girlfriend, my wife, is Indian, in between there were no Indians [laughs] uh so in between I dated uh one Vietnamese person, uh, a lot of Caucasian uh women, um, and… my—my—I think my parents are more progressive than most other Vietnamese parents so, I was very lucky in that sense. Uh, but, you know, they—they did have concerns about cultures, c—clashing, because uh, there are differences between the Vietnamese culture and the Indian culture uh, I was raised Catholic or—and with a Buddhist tradition, right, because Vietnam is originally a Buddhist c—country whereas my wife is very much uh Hindu. Uh so there was concerns about that uh for sure but uh… it wasn’t, uh it wasn’t a c…it wasn’t an objection, it was a concern, and… and I think anybody could understand that concern, I think it would be like uh, if uh… if an American married a Hungarian or Czechoslovakian woman, you know, maybe uh their skin color is the same but culturally, the difference could be so big that it might not work, I think that’s—that’s the same concern my parents had.

AJ: Okay.

SC: I’m curious, how did her parents feel about it?

HL: Her parents are fine, I think her parents are very progressive so, I—I told you they’re Hindu right? But they both eat meat so… [laughs].
AJ: Fantastic. Uh–time check, seventeen minutes.

SC: We’re supposed to go for one to two hours.


HL: [laughs]

AJ: Are you joking?

SC: No.

HL: [laughs]

AJ: Are you serious?

SC: Yeah.

AJ: You’re not joking right now.

SC: No.

AJ: This is real life?

SC: I’m dead serious. Absolutely dead serious.

AJ: Okay. I’ve run out of my five questions so…

HL: [laughs]

SC: All right, um so you mentioned that your Vietnamese wasn’t as it should be but you said that you spoke Vietnamese at home when you were growing up so how did that happen like

HL: My parents couldn’t speak English so there was no choice [laughs] so

SC: So like how, so… you spoke at home when you were growing up but now you don’t speak it as much?

HL: W–well, so… I went to uh I went to undergrad in ’93 and I didn’t get back to Houston until 2003. So I had a decade where I–I only spoke English.

AJ: Actually I had a very interesting question, I—and this is actually something I wanted to know, now I remember this now, your parents came–so you came with your father and uncle, drove to Houston and your mom and your sister joined you later.
HL: With that so, uh so something that I’m, so… w–we’re boat people right, we’re out at sea for so many weeks and days, like ten days and sixteen days, something like that. Ran out of water, ran out of fuel, uh crashed that boat into an island, wound up on the island, uh this Malaysian island, for uh, a–and the–the reason why the–the captain crashed the boat is because the Malaysian navy didn’t want us landing. There were lots of boats at the time and nobody wanted to take in V–Vietnamese refugees and so uh, the Malaysian navy was saying ‘go away’ and on the island itself was an AP awarded reporters or something taking photos so knew they couldn’t shoot us if we crashed the boat so, the captain crashed the boat. Uh, wound up on the island, uh the Red Cross eventually came around and–and we were on that island for six months.

AJ: Right

HL: During that six months, my dad knew my mother was going to take a–a different boat with my sister and sort of the idea was, we knew that, they knew that uh, boat people, or refugees that came that way, had a fifty-fifty chance of surviving. So they split the family in two so that part of it will survive.

SC: Oh wow.

AJ: And when your parents came to Houston, I want to focus on them because they’re very interesting to the study, I think as first generation immigrants. What–how did they get back on their feet again? Like, what were they doing in Vietnam prior to you guys leaving in terms of occupation of their jobs and what were they doing in Houston uh when they came here fresh, you know, as immigrants, what was the difference? [20:36]

HL: So my dad was a, uh so South Vietnam… basically if you didn’t do well in school you went to the army, or navy or air force. Or, you know, you went to the military, because there was a war going on so, percentage wise there were very, very few people who went to college or even– or even finished high school in Vietnam at the time. My dad, though, had become a lawyer, so he was–he had done very, very well. They lived a very, my dad at least, lived a very, very good life. He had scooters before there were scooters in Vietnam, he had two houses, you know. He had his staff, things like that. Uh and that was before the fall of Saigon. You know. Afterwards, uh, uh he got lucky because of my–my mothers side, uh her father, my grandfather, uh, had done some things and–and eventually, uh, they were, uh… the, there’s somebody in the North Vietnamese uh government that uh that, protected the family so uh, for–for a few years after the fall of Saigon, the family did okay. But then, uh, my parents tried to leave and at that point my dad was put in a re-education camp and my mom, uh, was, uh my grandmother bribed my mother out of jail–my mother and myself and uh, some–my uncles out of jail and when we were bribed out of jails we had no paperwork so we can’t live inside the city so they lived out in the farms while hiding from the government.

AJ: And your dad’s experiences in the re-education camp, what was that like, was it a violent camp or was it a political camp? What was it like?

HL: Uh it’s a–it’s a jail essentially, forced labor in my dad’s case. So, he, so, he describes it as you know, uh, they went to–they were in North Viet–I think Hanoi, actually, I don't know, uhm,
and they went out into this moggly, boggy marsh kind of area, uh chain–chained together, and
gave him a shovel and said start digging and we’re going to build an island in the middle of this
lake… so, they were out and people died because of disease uh, and eventually he–he got sick
too, and like, just sick. Uh but when you’re just like ill, like that, they don’t let you rest. And so
people were dying because they were, they had cold or whatever, in terms of pneumonia and
then–then you die. So you’d have to be physically injured where you couldn’t do the work. So
he, uh, uh he–he stuck his foot into a, uh a sharp wooden edge, so that his foot would be bleeding
and he could go to the infirmary where he could really rest up and get over his sickness. So that
was probably, he said, the–the hardest part.

AJ: And,

SC: How long was he in there?

HL: I think six, nine months, or a year–I can’t remember. Quite a while.

AJ: Wow. And during that time you didn’t get to see him very much I suppose, or at all.

HL: Yeah, no. No.

AJ: And how was your mom coping with everything like raising you and your sister and having
to deal with you know, the whole political situation, how was–how was–your mom probably
seems to have been like a rock in your life in that case.

HL: Well yeah, so my mom had me and my sister and my uncle uh also, my dad’s brother, was
helping uh my mom as well so we were all lived out in the farm area uh, while he was in jail.

AJ: And how were you guys making your living out there, just doing agricultural work or

HL: Yeah, and I suspect–I’ve never known but I suspect living off savings from my
grandmother, on my dad’s side.

AJ: And I suppose it was like a community with many different families who had similar
situations right?

HL: No, ‘cause at the time you don’t really want to bring attention to yourself so you g–get to
know nobody.

AJ: To be as nondescript as possible in that case… And when they came to Houston how did
they pick up again, what, you know, how did you guys… how did you get to where you are and
how did your parents support you through school, through college and stuff like that?

HL: So uh when my dad first landed in America, as I said, there’s some government assistance
available so he went to school, uh, to g–get a degree. I think he eventually, I don’t, got an AA
degree? Uh… uh but you know, as soon as that ran out they moved to Houston, his first job was
selling uh insurance door to door in the Third to Fifth ward so, he would literally go door to door
to these very, very impoverished areas and sell basically funeral policies right, because these families need insurance policy so they could pay for the funerals.

AJ: Wow

HL: So they could pay uh these funeral policies. The way these things work is that you go door to door every week and pick up cash so that those are the premiums. And so it was pretty dangerous, so he was mugged several times, that kind of thing. He did that for a couple of years. Uh, at that time my mom uh cleaned hotel rooms for a few years uh and eventually my dad found a job uh in ’84, 1984, you know, with Exxon, doing data entry for Exxon uh and my mom, uh a couple of years later also found a job with Exxon. So before my mom found a job with Exxon she did house cleaning, she helped with move ins, loading and unloading, my dad would sell insurance, he, you know, worked docks, the docks at various places to move equipment uh for electronics resellers.

AJ: So whatever he could get he’d try to do.

HL: Right. And so, my dad actually got a data entry job at Exxon and my mom, um at the time the computers ran on tape drives, large tape drives.

AJ: Yeah.

HL: So her job was to move those tape drives from one place to another and store ‘em and put them on computers and things like that. So, did that for several years before uh they both started getting promotions and things like that and so uh, I think eventually my dad became a data analyst for Exxon.

AJ: Wow.

HL: And my mom, uh… uh, well, actually my mom quit. So when I went to college, they realized they couldn’t afford uh both me and my sister in college and so uh, my mom quit her job and they bought a grocery store… so that uh they could get more income, and they owned the grocery store for about six months, or six years, sorry, or seven years. [27:09]

AJ: And where was the grocery store located?

HL: Uh, North Houston. So like, they were, the ‘Grocery Store Years’ as I’d call it, they’d work from eight till ten every day, six days a week. So.

AJ: And who were their main clientele? Was it mainly um, Asian Americans or was it everybody—

HL: Hispanic. Uh, almost a hundred–ni–eighty percent Hispanic?
AJ: Okay. You’ve spoken a lot about um Hispanics and their involvement in your life… do you see a lot of connection between the Asian American community and the Hispanic community in Houston?

HL: I–I think so, I think every immigrant, every immigrant, uh… culture, i–in a sense that–w–when they come to America and there’s Italians in the early part of the century or the Vietnamese, recently, or the Hispanics, even now, I think it’s very, very similar across, uh the experience is very similar across all those immigrant cultures. Uh, you know, because they all start of–with the–there’s one culture that’s different, I feel, we’ll talk about that a little bit later but they all start off very, very poor, is the consistent thing. Uh, and that, and–they start off poor but they also start of having taken a risk to come here. So, I think just by that–that alone, you have people who are going to be a little of risk takers and going to be hard workers because to get here, uh you can’t just, coast.

AJ: Mhm. And your pa— I’m going to go back to your parents again because I think they have a really interesting story! But, I know you said that you never really experienced any you know discrimination or anything growing up in the United States but perhaps your parents’ story is a bit different because they came to the United States in a time when, you know, Asian Americans were not given the–the same kind of recognition that they have today. Um, did they experience anything in terms of difficulty in assimilating and socializing and acclimatizing to the culture here?

HL: Well, let me… like every other immigrant population, I think I’ve experienced discrimination, they’ve experienced discrimination. It’s how… the, I can’t speak for others but I know how the Vietnamese population reacts to it is slightly different than maybe, others. Uh, we generally, ignore, the discrimination. L–let me give you an example. UhI was talking to a college–when I was in high school, talking to a college admissions officer at a very prestigious school, I won’t say which one, but a very prestigious school, the admissions officer, now, this is the admissions officer, right, told me explicitly, uh, you’re Asian, you must have higher scores and do more than any other race to get into my school because we have too many Asians already. Okay? So, so, right, at the time I heard that I thought, that makes sense to me! [Laughs] Right? So, so, it, it–I think the way we react to it is slightly different, uh, applying for law firm jobs, right, uh… once you get to the interview stage at a law firm, you overcome their first hurdle, which is grades and your test scores, okay? After that hurdle, I mean, no client will ask ‘So, uh what were your grades in law school?’ you know? So, that doesn’t matter. What does matter is, uh what kind of person are you, do you seem like you’re trustworthy, things like that and, and being Asian, is a barrier to that.

SC: Oh really.

AJ: Why is that so?

HL: Well, because culturally, you think about that as culturally. Culturally, we’re–we’re withdrawn a little bit, or reticent to speak. Right? And so, as a lawyer, if you’re going to be a rainmaker and bring in clients, that’s going to be a serious impediment. It’s–it goes back to that thing you asked about politicians, why aren’t there more Asian politicians? Well because, we’re
not out there, we’re not necessarily going to be in the spotlight… right? And as a successful lawyer, part of what you need to do is just that. I mean it’s no accident that lawyers become politicians. Right? So the same skills that make successful politicians also can make you a good lawyer. Um and, and, as an Asian, you’re not necessarily going to have that and how you… talk to people is also going to differ. L–let me give you an example. When I first applied to law school, uh everybody was an elder and so you have to provide respect to everyone that’s sen—and so the way you speak to them is not as an equal, right? But is as a, uh

AJ: Subservient kind of…

HL: Subservient kind of person. When I got to law school I realized my peers are not doing that, they’re talking to their interviewers, as if they’re… peers. Right? And that was a–that was a definite, definite change in context for me so I had to change the way, I interviewed, uh in order to get the job so, so, you know, it’s a–it’s a significant thing. [32:27]

AJ: So, you said you had to change then the way you adapted to interviews and stuff, so do you find that you have to kind of separate the Asian part of you from the American part of you?

HL: Yeah so. Absolutely, so… uh, when I got down to col–college I took the uh, the uh, I can’t remember what the test is called, where they f–figure out whether you’re an introvert or an extrovert?

AJ: Really? [laughs]

HL: Uh, what test is that?

SC: I’m not sure.

HL: Uhm, anyway

AJ: Personality test.

HL: Yeah, personality test, I was a I–an introvert, okay, when I exited law school I took the same test and I was an extrovert and it was a conscious decision because I knew, that after meeting everyone in law school, I would not succeed as a lawyer, being the way I was.

AJ: And you said the Vietnamese culture makes you kind of very much introverted…

HL: Yes, I mean I… y–you see it… even in the way, you say hello, right? So, uh my friend’s kids when they come by, they say hi–either come by and wave hi, and run back and play. When I visit my parents’ friends, they told us to go straight up to the adult.

AJ: Mhm

HL: Bow, say hello, stand there for a little while, and then go. So, just from the way you say hello, it’s different.
AJ: And did people ever like, judge you for that; like in the broader context of society for your Vietnamese values?

HL: No, no, I think America is very… welcoming about that. I think people have very, uh, varied, with… differences.

AJ: Okay so by and large, you feel like your family is definitely accepted… in America.

HL: Yes.

AJ: And in terms of, I’m sorry do you have a question?

SC: No, I was just wondering, um you mentioned with uh the law school… um and the college admissions officer, you experienced discrimination in that way, were there…

HL: What’s called discrimination?

SC: Well

HL: Differences, right?

SC: Yeah, were there any instances of like, overt discrimination, of people, acted negatively towards you because you were Vietnamese when you were like growing up in school?

HL: Uhm, I went to Alief, which is predominantly minorities, so that helped, I think. Uh, at USC, uh, you know, going to fraternity parties was definitely difficult [laughs].

AJ: [laughs] Is that–is that the stereotype that frat boys are very much white, Caucasian males and…

HL: You know, it depends on the fraternity uh for sure? But-but uh yeah, some of the fraternities, you know, uh I’ll give you an example. Uhm, some of the fraternity–fraternities, actually all the fraternity parties that uh were available, you’d have to get your name on a list, right? And uh, there were some fraternities that clearly didn’t want my name on that list, so.

AJ: So do you feel like uh there were institutions build into the system that kind of… have that, glass ceiling effect almost? Like in terms of the fraternities, in terms of the things you talked about in education, in terms of law, do you feel that the United States still has these systems that kind of prevent you, as an Asian American from, I don’t, reaching your full potential, or doing the things you want to do?

HL: I–I’d phrase it differently. I’d say there’s a glass ceiling because there are cultural norms that in general America and Americans and successful people, have, that are not necessarily cultural norms within certain cultures. Right? We talked about one of them, where you treat, you talk to someone always as a peer.
AJ: Yeah

HL: Right? And that’s not something that the Asian population does very well. Right? So, h—here’s a good example. Uh… when, when I joined the law firm, uhm, I spoke with the partners of the law firm as if they were peers, I would ask, I would go to eat lunch with them and work with them as a peer. When I went to uh, my second company, I did the same thing with the, the Vice-President and the President level and I thought nothing of it, right? But people who joined the company later on asked, why is it that you get to have lunch with these people and I don’t? And the difference is not because I’m Asian but the difference is because I asked. Because, that trait, to treat your superiors as equals, is, is what… they view as successful, right? And people, whether they’re Asian or not, that don’t do that, are not going to be quite as successful, engaging or not. A—and the Asian culture doesn’t encourage them as much as others do. [37:33]

AJ: And I know you—you’ve got a company now, um, and I know you guys do travel a lot to Asia for business so first, if you could just tell us a little bit about the company that you have and what you guys do and then we’ll talk about how you guys go to Asia and then your experiences out there as a professional.

HL: So, the company is a software company so supply chain software um, has about… four thousand customers around the world, but ninety percent are here in the US but ten percent are in Asia. Uh we have offices in Asia, Hong Kong, Shenzhen and a sales person in Shanghai and we have a development shop in Vietnam, uh…

Waitress: Were you okay with this? Are you guys done?

SC, AJ: Oh, we’re good, thank you.

Waitress: Huh?

AJ: Oh yes, we’re fine, thank you.

Waitress: Leave it, or?

AJ: You can take it if you.

Waitress: Oh, okay.

SC: I’m still working.

Waitress: It’s okay, take your time.

AJ: Thank you.
HL: So uh, we have about one hundred and fifty, a hundred and sixty people working in Vietnam uh, doing software development for us uh and–but our headquarters and the bulk of what we do is in the US.

AJ: Okay. And uhm, interestingly, you’ve now kind of come full circle no? You came in as a child, to the United States as an immigrant, right. What’s it like going back to Asia, as a professional, as a man who has made it like on your own?

HL: You can never go home again. Uhm, I am less Vietnamese… than I am American. Um what I mean by that is that I know that there are cultural differences between me and–and other p–Americans who grew up here. But those differences are much more narrow than me and other Vietnamese people. I think if you talk to… any immigrant who came here in childhood, I think you’ll find they’ll say the same thing. You know the world views are different and it’s just–it’s hard to bridge that gap now that, you know, when you grow up h–hearing and learning to believe in things like democracy and capitalism, and–and–and the power of the individual right? Uh the importance of the individual, and then you go to another culture where, you know, uh…y–where it’s family first, society second, yourself third, i–it’s very different right.

AJ: So–so–that that ideology is different. So, then that’s interesting so, now you go back to Vietnam, ‘cause I know you go there for business and–and for your work. What are people’s perceptions of you there? Like, looking at from the outside like, you look, you–you’re culturally Vietnamese, you perhaps look like a lot of people there but I’m sure a lot of people must see you as being distinctly different as well, and they can pick that up probably as well no?

HL: Oh absolutely! They, they, you know there’s a, there’s a uh, we call it Viet View, it’s just, you know, and we’re–we’re v–very totally different. [AJ laughs] There’s no uh, there’s no doubt about it um, native Vietnamese recognize uh foreign raised Vietnamese in an–in an instant. It used to be ‘cause our size, we used to be just physically larger [AJ laughs] but no, we also uh, dress differently and talk differently and all that.

AJ: And has there been any, any experiences there that you could share that kind of make you feel a bit...

HL: Oh, so I was going o–on this uh… boat trip, boat, boat ride, into, towards this island and the lady who was uh, uh paddling the boat actually… was uh, talking to–to somebody and didn’t realize I was Vietnamese and she was t–saying that, that uh, that uh it was you know odd to see a Korean guy with an Indian wife.

AJ: [laughs]

HL: [laughs]

AJ: That’s not quite…but is there then ever a desire to return home? Do you ever feel like, you know, I–I know you said that you can never go home but is there–is there a desire to go home? ‘Cause there’s a difference there I think. [41:39]
HL: Yeah, I think there is a, yeah, there is— is a desire to belong, where— whoever you are, there a desire to belong. Sometimes, I mean, moving back to Idaho, sometimes that means moving back t— to Ho Chi Minh city, or wherever, there’s a desire to belong and— and so, some things like, for example, eating in Vietnam is much more comfortable for me than eating in America.

AJ: Wow! [laughs]

HL: Right? Uh, because I grew up eating Vietnamese food day in, day out.

AJ: Yeah.

HL: Right? And so, um, even today when I wake up, I’m really groggy in the morning and— and my wife asks me what do you want to eat, the first thing that pops up in my mind is like a bowl of pho or some— some variation of that right, but I don’t say that because when I— when I saw pho, there are like only three restaurants in all of Houston that I would go to.

AJ: Yeah.

HL: To eat that. Whereas in Vietnam, you know, in every other corner there might be something really good [laughs]

AJ: Right.

HL: So, so, things like that, um… the fact that… looks— looks are another thing right? The— the Western perception of— of beauty is what I grew up with, right? Because I— I grew up here, and I don’t fit it. Right? And— and I— I know that and I— but in Vietnam, it’s much less clear to me whether I look good or bad because I look like everybody else.

AJ: That’s also quite interesting because our understanding of America is that it’s a very multicultural place, it’s a place where everybody can fit in.

HL: Yes.

AJ: But in some ways, you still can’t, no matter how hard you try.

HL: Absolutely, you know there’s a movie about, uh, uh many years ago there was a uh Mexican American singer named Selena right, and there’s a movie made about her a— and where her father tells her you need to be more Mexican than Mexican and more American than American because you’re both [laughs] Right?

AJ: Yeah.

HL: And, and to an extent I think that’s absolutely true of immigrants and that’s you’ve got to be more American than American because if y— to the extent that you’re not, those differences are amplified by the way you look.
AJ: And going back to one of our previous conversations, you said there was a cultural minority
group that was different in Houston uh, than the Vietnamese and other groups. Which group is
this and why?

HL: The Indian.

AJ: Ah.

HL: Population.

AJ: In what way are they different?

HL: Because the Indian population came here generally to get graduate degrees, right, like
literally they would come for their master’s and PhD and whatever… uh or they came here
already as physicians, so they entered the US as professionals and–which is very different than
most other populations, er, immigrant populations.

AJ: And then with that you think that there’s a social hierarchy that kind of comes up between
Asian cultures and Asian immigrants in the United States?

HL: I–I don’t think there’s a social hierarchy, I th–think there’s clearly differences like I would
say that there were even fewer Indian politicians than Vietnamese or Chinese Americans.

AJ: Yeah.

HL: And, a function of that is that you think about it, you come over as a professional class. Why
would you wanna expose yourself to… the vagaries of, you know, politics [laughs].

AJ: And in terms of, sorry, and you’ve been having your mouth open…

SC: It’s okay.

AJ: No, go for it, after you please!

SC: Uh it was like a totally different topic.

AJ: Go for it.

SC: No, no, no.

AJ: I was going to switch the topic so it’s after you.

SC: I was… wondering, going back a bit, uh during the grocery story, was that when you were in
college?
HL: Yes.

SC: So, were you helping your parents with the grocery store at all or were you in a different city?

HL: No, I was in a different city so I wasn’t, uh I didn’t help at all, actually uh. You know, it was an incredible move by them, because what my dad basically said, we—he—I think this—this—this tells you why he was able to get on the boat to try to leave right? He looked at the situation and said ‘Okay, I can’t afford both Huan and Judy (my sister), to be in college, I—I just can’t do it. But I need to be able to let them choose wherever they go to school,’ okay? So, I need to do something else, so he—he goes and looks for a grocery store to buy, and he wanted to buy a small one at first but realized that it wasn’t enough money, essentially, the smaller ones, so he bought a full-blown one, a grocery store. Puts you in the market in there with everyone else. Had my mom quit, so she would work during the day, like all day, and he would work with Exxon still, they needed the insurance and the uh safety net, then after work, he would drive straight to the grocery store and work uh from, from the end of his Exxon shift to about nine to ten at night every day.

AJ: Wow. And I think we have another ten minutes so I just want…

SC: We have…

AJ: Sorry? Well

SC: We have one to two hours.

AJ: Tranquila. I wanted to talk about identity. Um. You know, how do you identify yourself then, on a spectrum, where do you see yourself fitting in in society and what are your aspirations for, developing, you know, the Asian American model idea in the future?

HL: I—I would say t–this differently. I identify myself as very clearly American. Um. I think that the next century, Asia as a continent and i–individual countries in Asia will be extremely important. So, as an American to further the American… uh prosperity, I think it’s important that—that it turn from Europe to Asia and, and, and uh engage in Asia m–more directly an–and… more directly so that it can, it can understand how to engage and—and in some instances, when it has to win. And I think that’s very, very important. So I think, that’s why I like Asia Society so much because it is just that, right. It’s—it’s an organization that can turn the U.S. attention from Europe to Asia.

AJ: And how—how do you think… what would you like to see Asia Society do a bit more, in terms of your idea of kind of bridging that gap and, and kind of spreading the Asian culture to as many people as possible so including as many people from different races possible, what steps would you yourself take?

HL: I, I think they’re actually doing a fantastic job. Um I don’t… you know, more of what they’re doing would be good. Th—th—the real trouble is that, you know, there aren’t a lot of Asian
Americans in Baduca, and so to say, to America, hey, uh you know, all your ancestors came from Europe, but now you try to turn your head—attention to Asia instead, is a very difficult thing. So, you know, you have New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston and other large cities with large Asian populations where that’s happening, where businesses are starting to go to Asia and things like that—and it’s more unusual than say, the Mid West.

SC: Yeah.

AJ: And you’ve travelled, I know, extensively in the United States itself. Do you see a difference in how Asian Americans are kind of assimilated and socialized here versus in other cities in the US?

HL: Yes, absolutely, I think this is really uh, this is really important. The Asian Americans—my cousins, in California, who grew up with a lot of other Vietnamese Americans, still have an accent.

AJ: Ah!

HL: Right? I–I don’t think I have an accent. I have a higher uh tone than most Americans would. I don’t think I have a strong accent. So that’s just one of the outward differences. But even, but there are even larger differences in terms of culture, right? The way they look at the world is a bit different than the way I look at the world. Uh they see the world as… as a struggle and their safety net is within the Asian American community, right? I see, this whole country as an opportunity, right and where I eat and uh and my family is my safety net.

AJ: Do you think then the concept of the American dream is still something that Asian Americans across the United States can still aspire to? Is it a real dream for the Asian American in the United States?

HL: I–I think it’s just as real for other cultures as it is for the Asian American culture. I think what’s, what’s slightly different is that the uh, is that the big component of the Asian American dream is an education component right? So, for example, uh, uh there’s a large, stronger more uh materialistic aspect of the ‘American Dream’ for, uh I think for traditional Americans, in the sense that, you know, uh I want three bedroom house, two car garage, a couple of cars, vacations, that kind of thing right? I think that’s true with Asian Americans as—as well but if they’re… not as wealthy but if they have a PhD in Anthropology—that would also be a legitimate manifestation of the American dream.

AJ: But it’s interesting because on one hand the—yes you say the A–Asian American, sorry, the American Dream is an opportunity for everybody. But on the other hand, we spoke about the idea of glass ceilings and the difficulties that Asian Americans have, kind of, you know in attaining that American Dream. So how do you find a level and reconcile those two… It’s a tougher question [laughs].

HL: It is! Because, a—as I said, I don’t think it’s a glass ceiling because you’re Asian American. I think it's a glass ceiling because there are cultural norms that—that make you successful in the
c–United States and those cultural norms are not necessarily viewed highly in other cultures. Right? Uh the ability to speak up and speak out. That’s a, th–that’s a, if you were a leader in America, you would speak up, you would let your opinion be known. In Asia culture, that’s not necessarily true right? In Asia, maybe it’s more important to be subtle, right, and convincing. In America it’s more important to be direct than convincing. And, and it’s a glass ceiling in that sense, not in the sense that I think Americans have a aversion to blacks, whites, yellows or any–anybody else.

AJ: So it’s a cultural ceiling rather than a…

HL: A race ceiling.

SC: We should probably get back to focusing on the personal since that’s…

AJ: Okay, sorry. After you, go for it, do you have any questions?

SC: Um yes, I was actually wondering… um kind of an abrupt shift in topic, where was your family when Saigon fell?

HL: Uh we were in Saigon. Or, let me rephrase that, my mom and dad were in Saigon, they had not married yet, so, as I can–they don’t talk about it much but as I can piece it together, uh my mom and dad were dating, my dad had a friend who uh ran the port in Vietnam and had uh arranged space for him and my mother uh to leave the country and he had to get my mom’s support b–but he knew my mom would not leave her family. So he told her that they were going to get supplies or something like that and basically tricked her and tried to get her to the port. There was a bridge they had to cross, there were two tanks on it so they couldn’t cross that bridge… uh and they didn’t make it out… When the country fell.

SC: And… and you mentioned that for a while that your grandparents’ connections were able to keep your family protected. How did they come to have those connections and do you know what kind of connections?

HL: So, so my, uh my grandfather on my m–mother’s side of the family was from the north of Vietnam so it was clearly a connection between my grandfather who passed away before my dad and somebody…

AJ: And, and, you know, I guess before the fall of Saigon your family was like, they had friends, they had a, you know, a bunch of people who they were hanging out with. Did you ever keep in, do they ever keep in contact with the social sphere that they had in Vietnam after the fall?

HL: Yeah so, uh where I’d say we moved from Seattle to Houston, the reason why we moved to Houston was one of my dad’s friends from high school was in Houston and he said ‘Come, live with us for a few months and find a job’ so uh that was–that was how we ended up in Houston… and I think a lot of… Vietnamese population centers wind up population centers because of that, because, you know, friends saying ‘come join me’ in the city.
AJ: Today, how cultural are your parents. Are they still alive, I’m sorry?

HL: Yeah, yeah.

AJ: Okay, great. So how culturally Vietnamese are they today versus, you know, twenty years ago for example?

HL: Uh more so today than they were before because uh there is more opportunity right? When I was growing up in Houston there wasn’t a Vietnamese television station. And I think now we get satellite between three and four. Um there are more Vietnamese people. Uh there are more Vietnamese groceries stores, more… everything right? So, there are more Vietnamese today than there were when I was growing up. Yeah.

SC: It hadn’t even occurred to me.

HL: [laughs] [55:31]

SC: Um so I was also wondering um after–after the captain grounded the boat on that island, and when you were in Malaysia for that while, um where was your family living?

HL: Yeah so that island eventually became a refugee camp and–and uh so when we came to the island, was a jungle, right? When we left, all the trees had been cut because uh you know it was a rapid (?)… so many refugees there. So um now it’s all grown back but uh, but uh it eventually became a re–refugee island and that’s how I wound up in America is because uh various countries set up uh little uh offices there to process refugee applications so France was there, the United States was there, there were uh…

SC: And you said a church sponsored your family to come to the States so how did your family, have that connection, like how did you get in touch with the church?

HL: I believe at the time a lot of churches were trying to help Vietnamese refugee families. So, you know there–there were just programs that did that. M–my family happened to be Catholic, I think. You know, the churches in the US sponsored a lot of families I think. Or their–actually say their members sponsored a lot of families.

SC: And how does that process work, if you could…

HL: I also don’t know!

SC: [laughs] Okay!

HL: Um. You know, I’m just truly grateful that I was there [laughs]! Yeah.

AJ: Do you have any last questions? I’ve got nothing.
SC: Um and how… um how long was it before your mother and your sister joined you on the island or did they you know…

HL: No, so they had it worse. They were uh out at sea for five or six weeks and they eventually ran out of water so they were using the—the dew, the mist uh, to drink. Um and what happened is—is that there was a typhoon and uh so what I understand, the laws of the seas say there’s a typhoon there’s an SOS so you—you should pick up the people in that boat. So my—my mom, my sister were on one of the first boats that was picked up by a—a U.S. Navy. So it was picked up, by the U.S.—after that that there was a flood of the U.S. Navy picked up a bunch of boats and theirs was one of the first and so they were picked up by the U.S. Navy and wound up in Singapore.

AJ: Yay! Home! [laughs] [58:15]

HL: Yeah, for quite a long time or several months and after Singapore they flew straight to Seattle. So for several months we didn’t know where they were and they were in the middle of...

AJ: Wow. That must have been really tough on your dad in that case and you.

HL: Well no…I didn’t know any better [laughs]. But my dad and my mom for sure.

AJ: So t–t–that was more of a roundabout way than, than how you came to the United States.

HL: Both roundabout. We were on the Malaysian island for a while then Seattle. They wound up in Singapore for awhile then Seattle. So…

SC: And… you mentioned that um your parents tried to get out several times before they actually succeeded but you said that they were put in (?)… and um…how harshly, ’cause I, I’ve heard that a lot of people who were caught were… how did they…

HL: So, uh the first time my parents tried, well not the first time. The time my parents were caught was when they were trying to leave they relied upon a priest who betrayed them and everybody else on that boat ’cause there was a boat, you know it was going to go out… and at the time the rule was, whichever province or area h–houses the prisoners, uh gets to take whatever they find, right? So we were on this boat that was supposed to leave you know at midnight but it just st–stayed there for hours and what they were doing is that they were trying to build a prison so that as soon as… the passengers were caught they could take all the gold, and all the money and all—all that. And so, that’s how they were arrested, uh is that and I think the only story I remember from that is, is that you know, I don’t remember anything, the only story I remember is, is uh that my dad said that my uncle said something stupid and uh to one of the of–police and was knocked over the head with a rifle. So uh…

AJ: Anything else?

SC: Um is there anything that you would like to mention that we have managed not to ask about? I know we probably have not touched on a lot of things…
HL: I think that, you know, there are variations of the immigrant story but they are all essentially the same which is that something bad was happening at home, ‘cause otherwise, why would you leave, you know, and they saw the U.S. as an opportunity uh and that, view of the world means that a lot of immigrants were successful uh a–and I think that’s uh, I don’t think that describes success or failure to necessarily culture because I think it’s more granular, I think it’s more, I think the people who choose to go are willing to take a risk and the people who choose to go are uh motivated so w–when you wind up with those people you wind up with a better group who would go than not.


HL: Sure!

AJ: It’s been a real pleasure and… that’s one hell of a story! [laughs]

HL: [laughs]

SC: Thank you.

(1:01:54) [The recorder is turned off, the interview ends]