

**Houston Asian American Archive**  
**Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University**

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Interviewee: Al Hoang

Interviewer: Quynh Le

Interview Date: May 6, 2013

Transcribed by: Quynh Le

Edited by: Priscilla Li (5/24/2017)

Audio Track Time: 01:00:35

Background:

Al Hoang was born in Phan Rang, Vietnam in 1962. His father was in the South Vietnamese Army until 1975, when their family migrated to the U.S. They settled in Reading, PA and were sponsored by a Catholic church. Al later moved to Carthage, MO to join a Vietnamese congregation, while his father moved to Houston to open up his own business. Al held several small jobs in different locations during summer break to fund his education. In 1983, he returned to Houston to enroll in University of Houston as a Philosophy major. His family operated a grocery store. Al eventually owned and operated a liquor store, participated in an anti-communist-Vietnam organization, took trips to Vietnam, and was arrested by the Vietnamese government in 1992 (released in 1993). He then returned to the United States to continue his study and become a lawyer. In 2007, Al Hoang was elected the President of the Vietnamese Community of Houston & Vicinities. In 2009, he was elected City Councilmember of District F for the City of Houston.

Setting:

The interview took place at Al Hoang's office at Houston City Hall. The interview was a little over one hour. The interview focused on labor, working environment of Vietnamese Americans in Houston, and political issues within the Vietnamese American community. Al recounted many of his childhood memories, stories, and shared his thoughts and perspectives on the Vietnamese American community in Houston.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

QL	Quynh Le
AH	Al Hoang
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

**QL:** This is an oral history interview of Mr. Al Hoang at his office in Houston Texas on May 6<sup>th</sup> 2013. Interview conducted by Quynh Le for the Houston Asian American Archives at Rice University's Woodson Research Center. So thank you for being here with us today. So why don't you start the interview by telling us—introducing yourself and telling us a little bit about when and where you grew up.

**AH:** Thank you Quynh, and first of all it is an honor for me to be interviewed by you. As an Asian I'd like to—I would like to contribute my portion of the growth of the Asian community here. So it is an honor and thank you. Well I am uh the 6<sup>th</sup> child of my family. We have a large family. I have nine siblings, including me would be ten. And I was born on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1962 in Phan Rang, Vietnam. In 1975 after the fall of Saigon we migrated to the

United States.

**QL:** Yes. And uh can you tell—can you describe a bit about the hometown where you grew up?

**AH:** Well my father, my mother migrated from *Nghê An* [Nghe An city] in 1954. And at that time you know Vietnam was divided in two countries. One is North Vietnam under the communist regime, and one is South Vietnam under what we call the Republic regime. So my father and my mother migrated down to, to the south. And uh...uh they were young; they did not have any child that time. They came to South Vietnam then they had ten children, including me. So, I was born in Phan Rang. But uh my father he was in the army. So uh we moved to *Ban Mê Thuôt* [Ban Me Thuot] in 1966 because he had to post in—in Ban Me Thuot. Ban Me Thuot at that time was only a small city of, I believe, fifty thousand folks the most. I lived in what we call in Vietnam they call *nhà quê* [the countryside]. You know, it's like a peasant—

**QL:** The countryside?

**AH:** Yeah the countryside, the peasant side. So, uh um it was...kind of boring. But uh I was so young, most of the time I was in school. And that's what it is.

**QL:** Yes. And you mentioned your father worked—uh your father was in the army?

**AH:** Yes. My father was in the army uh in—from 1960 something up 'til 1975. He was in the South Vietnam Army. In uh in 1975, in March, North Vietnam um controlled, actually, they took control of Ban Me Thuot sometime on March the 10<sup>th</sup> or March the 11<sup>th</sup>. At that time I was already about twelve-something, and I already joined what we call a Junior Seminary. So I mean I left my family in 1974 when I was only about eleven something or twelve. When I joined the Junior Seminary my family already left the city. And then after the, after North Vietnam took control of the city, then I, I left the city and caught up with my family. We then went through the jungle and mountains, and escaped ourselves down to Nha Trang, and then by boat to Saigon. So we came to Saigon about April the something, 14<sup>th</sup> or something like that. But eventually North Vietnam troops came to Saigon. So we left Saigon the last day, April the 30<sup>th</sup>, on the last navy of the Republic of South Vietnam's navy ship. They call it *Chi Lăng*, *Chi Lăng 2*.

**QL:** Yes.

**AH:** So we left on the last boat. And—and that ship, two of the engines died, didn't work, so the ship went zigzag from Saigon to Subic Bay for about almost ten days. And then uh we were rescued, not rescued, but we came to Subic Bay, we were picked up by U.S Navy ship.

**QL:** And how do you spell that, I'm sorry?

**AH:** Subic Bay. S-U-B-I-C. Subic Bay, of Philippines.

**QL:** Yes.

**AH:** Okay. Then we were picked up by the um the U.S Navy ship. They took us to Guam, G-U-A-M. Then from Guam we flew to Hawaii, then from Hawaii we flew to uh Pennsylvania. And we stayed in the, what we call the refugee camp Indian Town Gap up until November the 6<sup>th</sup>. I remember that day we left Indian Town Gap. We were sponsored by a Catholic uh uh... church, a parish in Reading, R-E-A-D-I-N-G. They spell 'Reading' but they pronounce it 'redding.' So we were sponsored by the... Catholic church in Reading, Pennsylvania and we... settle ourselves in Reading, Pennsylvania first.

**QL:** And you settled in Reading in... that was still in 1975?

**AH:** Yes.

**QL:** Okay. Um so what did your parents do in Reading?

**AH:** My father became a janitor for a hospital in Reading, Pennsylvania. At that time his salary was \$1.90/hour. And at that time a Coke cost only, what, five... only a nickel, five cents. A U.S. postage stamp for the 1<sup>st</sup> class was only four cents. So his salary was \$1.90 at that time.

**QL:** And what about your mother?

**AH:** My mother was only a housewife. She took care of us. Ten no eight—eight of us at that time.

**QL:** Yes. So can you describe a little bit about the area that your family settled in in Reading?

**AH:** Eh we settled in an... a... an area that is 100% white and no black. So I experienced uh discrimination for sure. In my...um in my school, I was the only Asian in the school. And I was kinda, to the girls—to the American girls, I was kind of cute. So they volunteered to teach me English during lunchtime. Usually the sisters assign one or two of them to coach me on my pronunciation. That is also a problem because the boys, they don't like it. So they usually, in the restroom, they jumped on me, ten of them, twenty of them, they jumped and beat me—beat me up in the restroom. I could not stand it anymore. So one day, I believe it was sometime in 1976, I don't remember the date, exact date, but at that time I got mad, I, I, I used what we call the Vietnamese kungfu, the *Vovinam*. And in the foot—I mean, yes, in the football field I jumped up and I knocked down the bulliest, the toughest guy in—in school. I remember I broke one or two of his teeth, I'm sure of that, you know. And the principal—she was mad. She called me up, lined up in front of everybody in the school, and she said to me: 'You wanna kungfu? I wanna kungfu you! You think you know how to kungfu? I will kungfu you!' Anyways, she reprim-reprimanded me, and scolded me. My sister was in the school too. She was, kind of how should I say this, I brought shame to my family, dishonor to the family. So she came back and she told my father that I knocked down the guy in the school and I was...I became you know a, a shame to the whole family. My father, at that night, beat me up with uh the broomsticks. I believe he broke one or two of the broomsticks. And I said, "Well you know father you don't know me, you don't know them so...you know, that's the real life." That's it. I didn't cry. So that's how I experienced life in Reading, Reading, Pennsylvania.

**QL:** Yes. And how long did your family stay in Reading?

**AH:** After two winters 1975, 1976, my father decided to move to uh New Orleans. They wanted to go to the south because... I remember it was very cold. But I left the family in 1977 uh during the summer to join a Vietnamese congregation, a Catholic congregation in Carthage, Missouri. So I left there in 1977, I went to Carthage, Missouri to join a Catholic congregation. My father moved to New Orleans early in 1978. And then, I think he went over here, yeah, in Houston to find a business, he opened the first business we called The Billiards Game in 19—

**QL:** I'm sorry, what?

**AH:** The Billiards Game.

**QL:** Ah yes.

**AH:** Yes, a pool game. Pool. It was sometime in late 1978 he came to Houston. And uh... he leased a building of about twelve or fifteen thousand square feet. And that building is on San Jacinto. And now it's the First Bank. So it was in 1978 he leased and had his first business at that location.

**QL:** Wonderful! And uh may I ask um if he's told you anything about what the working environment was like for Vietnamese people in '79?

**AH:** Uh up in Reading, Pennsylvania. Um you know, like him he, he did not speak any English, so best for him is as a janitor or dishwasher or something like that. But he was a janitor at a hospital for about, up until 1978 when he left. And I didn't hear any complaints. He said you know it was boring, but uh did they pick on him?

Actually, at that time I was too young for him to tell me what happened. But it seemed he wasn't very happy with his job. That was one of the reasons why he moved down to the south to find his own work, to be self-employed.

**QL:** And so I believe your family was in um Louisiana for a very, very short period of time.

**AH:** Yes.

**QL:** And then they moved on to Houston.

**AH:** Yes.

**QL:** What was the working environment like in Houston? Did he tell you?

**AH:** Well he opened the pool game for Vietnamese. At that time Houston already had couple, I think uh, two—twenty or thirty thousand Vietnamese already. So he opened a pool game, a pool game business. So he was self-employed and he was happy. Uh if you be self-employed usually you don't have that kind of pressure. And he was very successful. It was a suc-a successful business for him.

**QL:** Were there any challenges that he had to face um economically or socially?

**AH:** Well at that time when he opened the pool game and people saw that he was successful, you know they also opened another, what we call a competition. Business competition for sure, yes. But in the—in the Vietnamese community, their—their clients, their customers were Vietnamese, 100%.

**QL:** Did he face any discrimination?

**AH:** No, in the Vietnamese community how can he face discrimination? He faced uh tough competition but no discrimination.

**QL:** What about the non-Vietnamese community?

**AH:** I cannot speak for them. I just—You asked me what happened, yeah. But sure, sure, every—at that time it was. Here we have what we call a KKK at that time. The three Ks, the Ku Klux Klan. And they... Well yeah, discrimination against the Asians for sure. And also we had a lot of gangsters here, too.

**QL:** I believe that would have been very dangerous.

**AH:** It was. It was a very dangerous and tough time at that time.

**QL:** But that time you were still in Missouri, correct?

**AH:** That time usually I had what we call a three-month vacation. So I go to Houston, I go to...Nevada or to Atlanta you know on the summer. One of the summers, I believe in 197- 1970—1980 actually, 1980 for sure. Uh at that time I had already just graduated from high school. So I went to Nevada, and uh... for 3 months and I worked as a maid in a motel for three months to uh financially support myself.

**QL:** And where in Nevada was this?

**AH:** Las Vegas.

**QL:** Yes. And uh what was the working salary that you... for that job?

**AH:** They paid me by the room. Actually each room, it was like, \$1.25 or \$1.50. I don't remember at that time. But it was quite good for me. I made good money because I was quick. I cleaned the room very fast. You know, I was young and energetic. So I believe my salary at least...uh two or three hundred dollars a week for that time. And at that time two or three hundred dollars a week is pretty good already. So I make good money, support myself. I got—I think I got a couple thousands of dollars after three months so that I can go to school.

**QL:** Yes and that was to fund yourself for college?

**AH:** Yes.

**QL:** And which college did you go to?

**AH:** I didn't go to college immediately. I went back, actually, to the congregation and become—became what we call a religious brother for five years. At that time I didn't attend the... not five years, three years. And then uh 1983 I came down to U of H—I came down here in Houston to study philosophy and settled down myself here. So uh... in 1983 I still was a member of the congregation but studying philosophy here. But I left the congregation in 1985.

**QL:** And that was a Vietnamese congregation?

**AH:** That was the Vietnamese congregation.

**QL:** Was there a big Vietnamese community in Missouri? Or at the place you stayed in Missouri?

**AH:** No, no. It was only a Vietnamese congregation settled in Carthage, Missouri. We had about, what, a hundred. But uh Carthage, Missouri, they don't have any Vietnamese. [He paused to have a drink of water] So I came here in 1983 and I studied philosophy and languages. I got my degree in 1989 and then I came back to Vietnam. And Vietnam imprisoned me for a year, 16 months in solitary confinement because I was trying to overthrow the Vietnam government. They released me and I came back here in 1983, and I had my Jurist Doctor degree in 1996. I practiced law in 1997.

**QL:** Uh so... may I ask why you went back to Vietnam after college?

**AH:** Because at that time, at that time, Vietnam was very poor. There was no human rights in Vietnam at that time. So I wanted to overthrow the government to have freedom and democracy for Vietnam. But it wasn't a good—well, it wasn't...easy. It was tough.

**QL:** Can you please um elaborate more on that—the whole process of...?

**AH:** I left the congregation and studied law and philosophy. I joined one of the Vietnamese organizations over here, working to overthrow the Vietnamese communist regime over in Vietnam. I joined the uh...the organization. I remember the date, January the 15<sup>th</sup>, 1986. I was very young. I joined the organization to be trained...uh to work against Vietnam. So I came back to Vietnam three trips. The 3<sup>rd</sup> trip, I was arrested. Trying to recruit people, that's what it was. And I was uh uh discovered, and uh... by they what we call the security [inaudible] of Vietnam. So they took me and they imprisoned me for 16 months in solitary confinement because of the organizations. You know in Vietnam, up until today there is only one party. Only one party that is the communist party. But here in the States we have two parties, at least, you know, multi-parties. So I was working for the, what we call, the multi-party system. And I was imprisoned by the Vietnamese communist regime because at this point the constitution of Vietnam still asserts that the, the country is ruled by one party only, that is the communist party.

**QL:** And then what year did you...what year were you imprisoned and what year were you released?

**AH:** I was imprisoned 19—in March 1992, and I was released out on July 1993.

**QL:** And uh before you went back to Vietnam uh did you hold any other jobs in Houston?

**AH:** Uh yes, I... when after my graduation—well before my graduation actually, I had already... have a liquor store. I, I, I worked in grocery stores and also liquor stores. And the liquor stores I own it. I purchased the liquor store from Spec's. And I made a lot of money on that, too. So...

**QL:** And um so, can you describe your experience working, for example, at the grocery store or at the liquor store? Um were there any...like how supportive was... the local people around there?

**AH:** The local people, the majority are very nice. But the African-Americans, they do not like us a lot because they think that we steal their jobs. But actually we create jobs, our jobs. We create jobs for us and do it. And we made a living...uh we made a living out of ourselves very decently. Uh we worked hard. We worked, what I worked was sixteen hours a day. But the local, espe—not the white folks—the white folks they can see that, but the African-American they were not—I see some of them, they were not very happy with, with the improving conditions, financially improving conditions by us. They think that we came here, so what else, recently came, for what, five, ten years, how could we, you know, be...they call us so rich. But actually, we weren't that rich. We just create our own jobs. And that's it. And we worked like, what, twice, three times as much as they, you know, they do. Uh what we worked sixteen hours a day, sometimes seven days a week. And that's why we got the surplus. That's how we got the surplus. And they were jealous of that, in a way.

**QL:** Yes. And so I believe you faced a certain degree of discrimination from that community?

**AH:** Yes.

**QL:** Um in what way... was it...?

**AH:** Well, they—you can see they used slang all the time. Uh and then you have heard on the news a lot. The Asians, especially the Vietnamese uh cashiers were shot by African-Americans, many of them. I had a liquor store on Almeda Genoa. At that time we got the bulletproof. Bulletproof everything. But, uh because of the bulletproof I wasn't harmed. And I—but my—my business was so successful, I made a lot of money on that. I had to open the liquor store from 10 to 9. Monday to Saturday. So six days a week, eleven hours a day. Sixty-six hours, that is as a cashier. But I also have to clean up or prepare myself an hour after or an hour before. So actually we worked almost eighty hours a week. Twice, you know, two full-time jobs already.

**QL:** Yes. And um so which area did you and your family stay in Houston?

**AH:** My father had his first business in downtown, as I said, in [inaudible] now, in San Jacinto and uh... San Jacinto and I believe, it's uh... Belle or Capital, something like that... And now it's the First Bank. My business was also in the African-American community. It was on Almeda Genoa. So—I mean, Almeda. Not, I mean—Almeda, Almeda Road. That is Almeda and Southmore. So it's also and [stammers] like midtown.

**QL:** So more in the Museum district now?

**AH:** Yes. Yes. In the Museum district now. African American, most of them.

**QL:** And where did your family live?

**AH:** My family, my father lived up in... Cavalcade. So that would be uh uh... district H now. So that would be... North Main and Cavalcade somewhere, yeah.

**QL:** Yes. And uh were there a lot of Vietnamese American people around that community where your father settled?

**AH:** No. We lived mostly in the Hispanic community.

**QL:** So at that time there were...

**AH:** But we go to work downtown so...

**QL:** But at that time the Vietnamese community was more concentrated in the Bellaire area...?

**AH:** No, the Vietnamese community was at that time was concentrated on Milam and Travis now. So, so we have... the Vietnamese community concentrated in midtown now. And uh the Vietnamese community, and also the Chinese community moved to Bellaire, let me see, approximately in 1998.

**QL:** Yes. Oh great. So after you were released in... '93, yes? Uh after you were released in '93, you came back to Houston. What did you do afterwards?

**AH:** I studied, got my jurist doctor degree, passed the bar exam and practiced law in 1997.

**QL:** Yes. And um—

**AH:** And I opened my office also in—also in midtown. At that time, actually the Vietnamese were concentrated in downtown. So I had my office on Travis Street.

**QL:** Yes. And um please tell me a little bit more about the experience of opening a law firm, in aro- especially around the Vietnamese community—

**AH:** I was very successful because at that time the majority of my clients, 98% were Vietnamese. And I was one of the first Vietnamese attorneys here in Houston. So almost everybody came to me. So uh I had a good time. Um and, and then I joined what we call the Asian Chamber of Commerce. And I went back to Vietnam again, sneak in, in 2001 but I abandoned the idea of using violent force against the...the regime. So I came back here and I said, you know what, the best way is trying to go into mainstream. So in 2007, I became the president of the Vietnamese community here. In 2009, I was elected as council member of the city of Houston. When becoming as Council member of the city of Houston, you know, time consumption is so huge. I reduced my law practice almost 90 or 95%. Well actually, becoming the president of the Vietnamese community already reduced a lot of my practice. I don't have enough time.

**QL:** But you—did you still keep your office—?

**AH:** I still have my office. Right now at 801 Congress, not very far from here.

**QL:** And you delegated your work to other members?

**AH:** Yes, to assistants.

**QL:** Yes and um how did you feel about the working conditions of um the Vietnamese Americans around the time, from...from the 80s to the 90s? How did you feel they transitioned?

**AH:** Well, the transition is, first of all, yes, we experienced some discrimination, especially with the KKK so, you know, at that time was still very strong here. And uh I had worked with many other Vietnamese fishermen. They complained of uh of uh...not only the discrimination, but uh targets of...uh they were the targets of the KKK to eliminate them. So...I don't remember, there were killings, some kind or some murders before, but there

were. And our community filed lawsuits against them. So the judge already settled that and the KKK could not do anything. So, right now you can see we improved ourselves a lot. Fishermen—the Vietnamese fishermen in the gulf area, they are improving their... their working conditions. Uh and also us here. So I think that we... um uh init-well... initially we began ourselves, like suppose the discrimination is 100%. Now it's gonna be about like 20 or 30%. It reduced tremendously, yes.

**QL:** Uh regarding employment, what did p- what did the Vietnamese American community usually take up as employment?

**AH:** Well I uh see that the first gen- the first wave of Vietnamese who came here, we worked as what we called the low class uh such as janitor, dishwashers, and things like that. And then some of them like my father, they want to improve themselves, they opened their own business. You can see that my father had a pool game uh business. Many of them on Milam and Travis they open restaurants and they are successful in that. So they became what we call self-employed in the...their own business. The second generations, they are different. They are... they become lawyers, doctors. Second and third generations are lawyers, doctors. They are in almost every field, engineers and NASA, what. Vietnamese in NASA, they have major roles in NASA now. So uh I think... individually the Vietnamese community, the people in the Vietnamese—Vietnamese community here is not like uh... not capitalized, individually they are very successful in almost every field. You can see that many Vietnamese are lawyers now. A bunch of them are doctors, especially, I, I see medical fields, many of them surgeons, uh pediatricians, dental—dentists, you know all of them, optometrists. So, Vietnamese people are very successful in those things. I think they are successful in almost every field. Even in business.

**QL:** Yes. Um I'd like to ask about the wave of Vietnamese that worked as fishermen a lot um...

**AH:** The first wave was in 1975. They experienced a lot of discrimination. They don't speak English up until today. That first wave in 1975, up until today, they still have their *own* shrimp boats, *but* they don't speak English that well. That first wave, now you see the Vietnamese have a couple of wave coming here. The first wave was 1975. 1975, the Vietnamese came here about 10 to 20 or maximum 30 thousand. Okay. And the second is we call the boat people. Boat people fled from Vietnam to uh refugee camps in Thailand, in Indonesia and stuff like that. And then they were accepted as refugee and they came here. That wave was from 1980 to 1988, some—well a decade. That wave is a lot. *Is a lot*. That came to—They came to the city of Houston and the vicinities a lot. That wave they still do the—they participate with the first wave to do some jobs like fishermen and all the things... uh grocery business. That's the second wave. But the thirds wave is different. The third wave is sponsored. They came here directly from Vietnam such as what we call the H.O program—the Humanitarian Orderly Departure something like that. And they came here, that's the third wave, from 1990 to 1998. And then after that we got what we call the fourth wave. The fourth wave is the wave of uh people from Vietnam officially as students—they have visa to come here as students, businessmen. So they came here. And then, the students they are going to do their, their study. They are successful. Businessmen they buy property here. So they are very successful. But now, the first wave and second wave now they have what we call the second generation, the third generation. So added up now, Vietnamese uh community here is, is quite complex because what we call, this is the melting pot now.

**QL:** Mm-hmm.

**AH:** So uh the first wave, second wave, and the third wave, most, the majority of them are anti-communists. Ok, they don't like the government over there. They just want to overthrow Vietnam. And that wave, including their... you know uh (stammers) I mean, the second generation and third generation, to some—third maybe not—but the second generation, still are very... the animosity against Vietnam's government is very high. But the fourth wave is not. The fourth wave said, well you know, we're different, we're students, we're businessmen. We—already we depart from Vietnam, we see things different. And so now there is, what we call a... almost like conflict points of views in the community, trying to see what can we do, what can we resolve, uh we can be here as friends, and can we help Vietnam, something like that. So, you will see that each wave, they approach of business is different. The first wave and second wave they don't want to do anything with Vietnam. They just want to concentrate and get their success here...uh and invest their money here. The third and the fourth wave, the third wave a little bit, but the fourth wave is that they want to have what we call bilateral trade—

**QL:** Yes.

**AH:** And they want to diversify their portfolio and investments. So, I think that the trend in the future is that the second generation and the third generation would join up with the fourth wave to see things different. And you can see that I, also second generation, I was one of the most extremists of the second generation. But I... been elected and also working with all the communities, the Asian communities especially with the Chinese community and all the Asian communities. I see things different. The best way to protect and to build a community is to be mingled, to be um...uh to be part of what we call Asian as a whole. Do not separate yourself out as only Vietnamese. If you separate yourself out only Vietnamese, you're not gonna be that successful. That's to me.

**QL:** Yes. So um I believe the, the conflicts that you mentioned earlier between the generations, that partially arises from the—for like the business choices, the political choices that they made based on the amount of knowledge or exposure they've had to certain cultures?

**AH:** The Vietnamese uh...uh community here uh...controlled, is controlled by the political points of view more than anything. So you can see that when they do business they still have to be... they have to cho- well they have to face the reality that politi- political activists who do not like the communist regime will attack them, too. So not only they attack politicians and activists who do not go with the same line as they do, they also attack anybody, even businessmen, lawyers, professionals who they call...uh um sympathizers to the communist regime. Actually, they love their patriots, but uh they don't see things different like uh all the folks do, like me. So, you are you asking me on the business points of view, people like to do business but they are so scared and afraid of the attack by the uh uh mm...political activists.

**QL:** Yes uh and how—how far back do you think this trend has been going on?

**AH:** This trend?

**QL:** The political activist.

**AH:** This trend has been here, established here since 1975. But eventually it will fade out. Especially folks like me who stand up and say, 'we have to—now we have to... divert ourselves from...uh the controlling political activists.' Because I see things different. I see things, you know um...ways that I believe we have to coordinate and, and partnerships are gonna be better. I don't see dependence only, I see interdependence.

**QL:** Yes. Uh so, I'd like to continue on with more personal questions regarding your own experience. Um you said you went to university and majored in philosophy.

**AH:** Yes.

**QL:** Why was that? Why did you choose that major?

**AH:** Because that time I was still in the congregation. I was studying philosophy for—to be a priest. And then after philosophy, what can you do with philosophy? You have to be a lawyer, that's it.

**QL:** Yes and that was the choice that...?

**AH:** No choice. I don't see any choice.

**Both:** [laughs]

**QL:** Um and you said that you worked briefly at a grocery store at one point.

**AH:** I worked in a grocery store, I owned it, family owned.

**QL:** So that was your family business?

**AH:** Yes, and my business too. I opened my own business later on as a liquor store.

**QL:** Yes. Can you describe the family business at the grocery store a little bit? How it operated and...?

**AH:** Like every store, you can see. But I said to you that we operated almost... what... as a grocery store, that's crazy. You have to open the store uh 7 o'clock and close at 11. Almost 7 to 11. So we, the family have to... we, the whole family has to...uh take turn. So um going to school and then attending classes and come back and then uh be an assistant. But I don't work that much. At that time, actually, then when I went to college I...I became a, what we call, a private tutor. I tutor children in the Memorial area, teaching them French and math and stuff like that. So, I did a pretty good job uh tutoring. My salary was good. \$30 an hour at that time so...

**QL:** Wow. And what year did your family grocery store open? Do you remember?

**AH:** Uh my family had the grocery store... I think it was in 1983. And then later on when I shift to, I was the one to borrow money from my dad and my mom and purchased the liquor store. I was the first person who was in the liquor store. In my family, and then uh uh... the trade, then uh...my family, I think they shift from grocery store to liquor store now, all of them. And they are still all in the liquor store now. Not me, I'm not in the liquor store anymore but my family, my siblings are in the liquor store.

**QL:** Yeah. And um so your family opened the grocery store in about '83. And uh so how long did they continue to do that?

**AH:** Up until 1980-something, 1990-something. I don't remember. But when I purchased the liquor store they saw that I did it, I was successful in the business. I don't have that many headaches like they do in the grocery business. So they shift from the grocery business to the liquor business.

**QL:** So about ten years, they had that for about ten years?

**AH:** Yes.

**QL:** What merchandise did they focus on? What product?

**AH:** Uh grocery stores, you have almost everything. Milk...

**QL:** Was it focused more on Asian food or...?

**AH:** No, no, no, because we were in uh the Hispanic and also the African community. So we had to focus on—first mostly at that time people make money on beer and cigarettes and milk and orange juice. So those are the things that they concentrate on. Beer...uh not wine because wine has to be in the liquor business. Beer, uh cigarettes, uh candies, those are the things.

**QL:** Yes. And um were there a lot of supermarkets or grocery stores run by Vietnamese Americans around at that time?

**AH:** Uh Vietnamese run grocery business at that time the most. Uh but the...Then and then later on, you begin to see big supermarkets like Hong Kong City Mall, things like that, they eventually grow up.

**QL:** So it was almost like the predecessor of those supermarkets.

**AH:** Yes.

**QL:** And then your family moved on to the liquor store business. How did that go?

**AH:** Yes. Because it was me. I, I saw grocery business was so uh... was so time consumption. And, and you know, you had... I had a lot of headaches, especially with spoiled products you know decayed products. Then I said well you know the liquor business, the more you're in the liquor business, you will like it because the—I mean, the—there, there is no decay product. The liquor is there, and the price will eventually go up and up, almost every year. So the inventory, if you leave it there, the longer the better. You don't have to worry anything. The time you don't have to spend from 7 to 11, you only have to spend from 10 to 9. You have Sundays and holidays off. So that's when I decided to do that.

**QL:** And your family followed suit and still remained in that stream of business to this day?

**AH:** Yes. Yes, 'til this day.

**QL:** And do you know which locations they opened their stores in?

**AH:** Yes. Um my sister has one... still has one in Kingwood. Uh my other sister has one in Pearland. Um my uh my brother has one in... South 45.

**QL:** Yes. So what other jobs did you hold in between the liquor store and moving on to your law practice?

**AH:** Well I started most—I—My wife, well actually before I got married, before that I was in...uh uh I had what we call the substitution for dry cleaning and for alterations. So my wife now is a tailor, she has two of her tailor shops. So she runs the tailor shops more than I do. I do not know anything about that so...

**QL:** And what was the average income or salary from those types of jobs?

**AH:** Well she does a good job and made a lot of money...And, and I also was in the real estate business. I did many things. I was in real estate business. I was uh... When I went to college, actually U of H, I had my real estate license. It was years ago but I didn't practice. You know why? Because later on as an attorney at law, usually...um I could be a broker, but I don't practice that. So—But I uh I developed my own land and made a profit on and that one time. And then I, I stopped when I ran for, for the... as the president of the Vietnamese community and the city council. Actually I stopped almost everything, I don't have enough time.

**QL:** Yes. Why did you decide to go into the real estate in the first place?

**AH:** It was before the crash. Real estate here was quite good. And then uh uh I made money on that. I invested in the real estate. But the crash now is so long...and it's delaying, so that's what it is. But also it is because, for how many years—2007, up until 2007, almost six or seven years as a public servant, I don't have enough time for that. So I just went and hold it late on.

**QL:** So when did you decide that you would like to go into the political mainstream with your elections?

**AH:** I decided for a long time but the question is that can I win. And I won in 2009.

**QL:** 2009. And the position for the president of the Vietnamese community?

**AH:** It was in 2007.

**QL:** 2007. And how did that process of election go? The... election in 2007 first.

**AH:** Well they, we... Vietnamese they have their own election. They have their own ballots; they elect. I think I won at that time; 7—I had 4000 something, almost 5000 votes for me.

**QL:** So how many percent was that?

**AH:** They call the Vietnamese here over 100,000 but you know voting here is not like in many countries. The turnout, if that is 10% it would be good, 5-10%. So...

**QL:** So how did—

**AH:** Well when you have, more than 5%, 10%. Because uh it has to be over the age of 18, right? Yeah.

**QL:** So why did you decide to run for that position specifically?

**AH:** They asked me. People just came to my office and say, you know, we need your help. Because those positions you don't have salaries, right? Many positions you...you'd be there just as the name, for serving the community.

**QL:** How has your interaction with the Vietnamese American community changed since then?

**AH:** Well the Vietnamese, you are Vietnamese and you want to contribute, but that's a very, very, very tiring, time consumption job. People are *very* demanding. It's a contribution back, that's what it is (?).

**QL:** Uh what type of issues did people usually bring up for you?

**AH:** Vietnamese communists, Vietnamese communists, Vietnamese communists, all the time. (Stammers) You have human rights violations and those are the things *most* concerned by the Vietnamese. They don't care any other things. You can do better than that, you're thinking you as a leader, as a young second generation leader, I see things, perspective, I see things differently. Such as approaching what they call the strength of the community economically, financially, also socially. But the Vietnamese community know that everything they approach is political point of view. But—the political points of view here, it doesn't mean that the mainstream political points of view, it's only 'we want to overthrow the Vietnamese communists, anybody, anything'—that's the only, you can see the theme is like 98% on that theme.

**QL:** Hmm... Have you seen that percentage um shrink a little bit?

**AH:** Constant, no, up until today it's the same thing. Constantly. You have a group, a small group, if they—if they stay small, but that group is very controlling. And if you step out of bound, out of that then they label you as a communist, a communist sympathizer, a communist agent, and they jumped on you. They turn the hatred on the communists, they turn on you. So that's what it is. So working with the Vietnamese community on that issue is *very, very* tough and tiresome.

**QL:** Yes. And uh do you continue to hold that position as president?

**AH:** No, I—No, no. After becoming the Council member I have to uh...vacate myself. So I had to resign.

**QL:** Yes, well do you see-

**AH:** And as a City Council member, I do my job as a City Council member working not only for one community—not only for the Vietnamese community but as the interest for everybody—the best interest of the City of Houston. I had a lot of successes here for the city of Houston. But because I said that we have to have

open dialogue with the Vietnamese communist government, I have been jumped by them and labeled by them as a traitor and things like that.

**QL:** So a lot of backlash?

**AH:** Yeah. But I do my job, I don't mind about that. It's, it's time to have open dialogue, that's it. Nothing else, nothing you can do. I—they just want to overthrow the communist government over there, you know. That's their... perspective. You cannot...you, you don't have anything. That's what—to me. And, and even talking to... to any communist member, or even to the Consul General over here, then they're gonna jump on you. As a city council member, hey, I can talk to any Consul General but no Vietnamese Communist Consul General. See?

**QL:** That's quite an extremist's point of view.

**AH:** Yes, it is.

**QL:** But have you seen any small changes with the younger generations?

**AH:** Yes, definitely. Definitely.

**QL:** Yes. But the older generations still stand their ground.

**AH:** Yes.

**QL:** And uh—

**AH:** At least my job, I think it's my job is to change the younger generation. I'm not that young but I'm not that old. I'm-

**QL:** In between.

**AH:** I'm the stepping-stone for the younger generations so that they can see things differently. They have to— The...the old way, uh they love their country, they are patriots, yes. But they cannot resolve the issues. There are, what they say, you have tons of ways to skin a cat. And I believe they have to change. To resolve the issues is not only by that. To resolve the issues there are other ways. And I believe I do my job as a stepping-stones for the younger generation. And if I do not have that courage to stand up, who can? Because right now I'm the only Asian Council member here, so I have to stand up for the younger generation.

**QL:** Yes. Um can you tell us a bit about your experience um with your election in 2009 for the position of City Council member?

**AH:** Sure. It was seven candidates. I was, let me see... the uh at that time I was an underdog. The one who had the—who really had the upper chance was Mr. Mike Laster. Now he's also a Council member. So Mike Laster uh is an attorney, a Caucasian. I was... They think that he was the one who should be the Councilmember, not me. The 2<sup>nd</sup> person was Mr. Joe Chow, a Taiwanese, Chinese-Taiwanese businessman who've been since 1960-something. The 3<sup>rd</sup> person is Mr. uh Mr. something, I forgot. But as for his last name, I think is Khan. Not MJ Khan for sure. Uh he is a Pakistani businessman. So we got three Asians, see? Three Asians in the same race. We have Mr. Louis Cook, African American attorney. So that's the 5<sup>th</sup> person. The 6<sup>th</sup> person is Mr. Peter... I forgot. But also—I believe he's also an attorney. Uh and then the 7<sup>th</sup> person was Mr. Robert Kain. And a Caucasian, but I don't know his background for sure. So we had seven people, three Asians, how many attorneys? One, two, three, about three or four attorneys at least. You got one black. If you count by ethnic you've got one African American, three Asians, and three Caucasians. So the race was tough. Uh people at that time think that Mr. Mike Laster would win. But actually he came out to be the first one, and I was the second one. So we had a run-off. And I won on the run-off. So it was a, it was a very tough race. It wasn't that easy. And now you know at that time District F had 210,000. Now we still have the same—about the same size of population.

**QL:** Yes. And why did—why or how did you decide to run for that position for City Council member?

**AH:** Anybody can run for city council member, as a citizen (stammers) if you are a resident of the city of Houston and you are U.S. citizen then you can apply and run.

**QL:** And what was your personal reasoning to run for that position?

**AH:** This is mainstream. You want the Asians to have a voice, this is what it is.

**QL:** Yes. And uh during that election process was there a lot of support from the Vietnamese American community?

**AH:** Yes, I did. I got a lot of support from the Vietnamese community. Because at that time I was still was a president of the Vietnamese community.

**QL:** Yes. Um but they... some, some became quite hostile once you started mentioning bilateral talks.

**AH:** Yes. Yes. Uh the second election still had a lot of support. But uh some of them became very hostile against me. Now my third election is coming up. And after the trip to Vietnam I believe I have some more who are gonna be very hostile against me. But talking to folks, who you know, the... the people... just the normal people, they support me because they think I do the right thing. You know, uh sometimes you do... To serve the constituents you cannot say that I serve everybody because not everybody is going to agree with you. So you just serve what we call the majority. Right? I think the majority, first of all now as a City Councilmember, I do not... not only I represent the Vietnamese community, I represent my district. My district has Chinese, Korean, Japanese, all Asians as a whole. African Americans, Hispanic, Caucasians. So I have to balance it out. If I was the president of the Vietnamese community, I serve the Vietnamese community. I just consider only the Vietnamese interests. But once as a City Council member I have consider, I have to balance out the Vietnamese interests on with the... all the community's interests.

**QL:** Yes um but do the Vietnamese community still have a very loud voice in asking you to focus more on these issues?

**AH:** They, they, they ask to focus on the Vietnamese issues. But the, the interest of the city of Houston is to open up for bilateral trade not only with Vietnam but every country, right? You know that. So we had to approach what we call a moderate approach, not extremist approach.

**QL:** Yes. Um so I'd like to move on to asking about your family life. Does your family—when you first move here, does your family still preserve the Vietnamese traditions?

**AH:** We do all the time. We do all the time. And even—

**QL:** Even your parents and your siblings?

**AH:** Yes, and even now. And even my children now, I teach them to abide by the Vietnamese traditions and values.

**QL:** Yes can you elaborate for our listeners?

**AH:** Tet festivals, things like that. Then speaking Vietnamese at home. Making sure that they learn Vietnamese. Those are the things that we want to, making sure that they know Vietnamese first.

**QL:** Yes. Great, wonderful. Is there anything you want to add to the interview?

**AH:** Uh well, I wish you a lot of success on your research.

**QL:** Alright. Thank you so much, and this is the end of our interview. Um well, thank you.

**AH:** Thank you Quynh. Thank you.

**[The recorder is turned off. The interview ends.]**