This is Thuy Vo Dang with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine. Today is August 31, 2012. I will be interviewing Mr. Alex Hieu Tran in Garden Grove, California.

TVD: First of all, would you please introduce your name and date of birth?

AT: My name is, my Vietnamese name is Trần Hữu Hiệu, born in Jan. 17th, 1957. When I came here and became an American citizen then my name is Alex Hieu Tran.

TVD: Where were you born?

AT: I was born in Đà Nẵng, Vietnam, near Sơn Trà beach.

TVD: Can you tell me a little about your family? Especially about your parents, their names and occupations?

AT: My father’s name is Trần Hữu Dinh, and my mother’s Nguyễn Thị Phương. My mother just stayed home being a housewife taking care of the children. My father was an officer in army of Republic of Vietnam, and his last position before he was imprisoned was Lieutenant at the military court in the third combat zone.

TVD: Do you have siblings?

AT: There are seven boys and three girls in my family. I’m number three in the family.

TVD: Do you have any memories of Đà Nẵng?
AT: Living in Đà Nẵng, then I was taken to Huế, and when I was about 7 years old I got moved to Sài Gòn. I had never come back to Đà Nẵng but only heard from my mother.

TVD: Why did your family went to Huế and then moved Sài Gòn?

AT: Not my family. My family moved to Huế, but for me, my father took me to Sài Gòn. When my mother gave birth to me in Đà Nẵng, and because of my father worked there. However, family and relatives lived in Huế, so after being transferred many times, my father moved the family back to Huế, then later my father got to teach in the military language institute, and since my father always took me with him, thus he took me to Sài Gòn to live with him.

TVD: Only you or with your other siblings?

AT: Only me.

TVD: Could you please describe your father?

AT: As for the appearance, he was quite tall, about 1.77m, and somewhat attractive, big face, yet he had a soft heart. He worked hard. He even worked without eating or sleeping, and we had to bring food to his desk for him. He only left there when he needed to use the toilet, otherwise he would just sit there, insomuch that there was a saying the family that if you, the children, got a little like your father, you would be so good. As for myself I can’t sit too long, for example, I would just sit to study, then I would have to walk around for awhile and then come back to sit and study again.

TVD: What about your mother?

AT: My mother is a very sweet lady, just stayed home to take care of the children. She always considers her children as young kids, even until now, although we’re old and matured, but if she doesn’t like, she would use a soup ladle to knock our heads.
TVD: When you grew up, when you was young, what did you think about your family social status, middle class or...?

AT: Before the liberation day we were about the middle class, but after liberation, it was complicated.

TVD: OK, we will talk about that later. There are many in your family, seven boys and 3 girls, and you’re number three in your family.

AT: Number three means my eldest brother, my second brother and then me, the number three. That means when people call the second, the third, I’m the forth, but if the first one is called anh cả (the first born) then I’m the third, the number three.

TVD: Do you have any memories or beautiful stories of your childhood in your family to tell?

AT: Many memories when talking about siblings. The most memorable ones were when we argued and fought and wrestled, and if there were nothing to argue about, we would wrestled just like we learn taekwondo. When we grew up we also fought, but at that time “your older brother replaces your father,” the older brother like a father. Therefore, when our father was not home sometime he would spank us with a whip just like our father did.

TVD: Did you and your siblings have opportunity to go to school?

AT: Before the communists took over, everyone went to school. Then later my eldest brother went study abroad in America 3 years before liberation, and my second brother also went about a year before the communists. It seems that only my second brother went to Chu Văn An school in Sài Gòn at that time, and the rest of us boys went to Petrus Vĩnh Ký. My sisters went to study at Gia Long, and when the communists took over the government, in my family I was the one who passed the exam to enter into college in that year, and I wasn’t able to continue study although I passed the test which was pretty easy. It took me only 15 minutes to finish everything, and yet I
couldn’t continue on. As for my sisters, they were still young, and so they were able to continue study, but they only could study until the end of high school and couldn’t go any farther into college. Later on, when they came here they continue to study here.

TVD: Let’s go back to talk about your life experience during the 60-70s. Was your family affected by war?

AT: Actually, since my father was an army officer, and he was also a lawyer, that’s why our family lived in the city, I didn’t have a specific experience of war, but during that period of time, for some unknown reason my father expected something from me. Everyday around 5 or 5:30am, when he listened to BBC, he always woke me up, as a young boy 12-13 years old, he woke me up and made me laid there with him and listened to the BBC channel with him, and day times, when he ate his meals, he would take out the papers written about war and made me read to him. I was so sick of it, but later on I understood what he wanted.

TVD: What was that?

AT: What he wanted was that even though growing up as a young kid in the city, I should understand about war.

TVD: Personally have you seen or experienced war?

AT: If talking about in particular of what I saw like gun fires, death bodies, I only saw that in the 28, 29 and the 30th of April. That time, the death bodies were piled up to be burned or something likes that, to be buried. Also there were injured soldiers, and when the communists invaded. Those were the things that most obvious. Guns that they abandoned and ran away, before the 26th-27th, the real soldiers came out from the jungle, set up booths along the streets. That was the time I saw it clearly. Guns fires and that was the time that I faced war personally, but before that
I only read about it on the newspapers and listened to the BBC channel with my father and didn’t see much.

TVD: So did you see American soldiers or did you have contacts with them?

AT: Talk about contacting with Americans before ’75, I taught Vietnamese for an American man whose name was John. He was a soldier or something like that, I didn’t know for sure, but I taught Vietnamese for him, so I followed him and met with other soldiers.

TVD: How did you get that job?

AT: My father worked with him, and there were Americans who wanted to learn Vietnamese, but he didn’t have time, so he told them “my son’s English is not so good, but good enough to teach Vietnamese,” so John said okay, come and teach him. So I taught him. I taught from when he had no Vietnamese, and after about a year or so. One day he came back and said in Vietnamese: “Hiệu, I could use my Vietnamese in a meeting with the Vietnamese” He was very happy. Another funny story of about him was that he had a Chinese wife. About 9 months before the communists came, he told me “I quit. I’m not going to study anymore, but I’ll go to Lao for a vacation, and I’m asking you to go with me.” I asked him for how long, 1 week or 2 weeks. He said no, about one year. About 9 months before the communists came he said to go for 1 year, but at that time I was in my senior year of high school, and the plan was that after I finish high school, I would go study abroad in America because I got all the requirements met. At that time, the requirements were that you had be on your own, and with high grade, and as the same time, you had to have someone in America to sponsor for you. Whoever had a sponsor, he or she would get to go immediately. My father had arranged all of those already, and I thought that I didn’t need to go, since I don’t want to depend on other for anything, and if I go like that I wouldn’t be able to learn anything, and when I come back I wouldn’t be able to go with the other
Actually, he had some hidden intention that I didn’t understand, but he asked me to go, go with him and come back in one year, and 9 months later the communists took over Southern Vietnam. Perhaps he knew that ahead of time. I thought so. He was a person who worked for an agency. Later on I taught another American man who was a captain, and his name was Smith. His face was small, but he had a very big belly, maybe he drank too much beer, I don’t know if that was true though. He was sitting to study Vietnamese, and he was breathing, and the weather in Vietnam is hot. He was studying, breathing and sweating, and yet, he kept on studying. Later on, one month before the communists took over he stopped, and I didn’t know where he went.

TVD: So did you go to Lao?

AT: No. I thought it was good if I did, and the time that my father went to study in Tulane University to get his Master of Law, and there was an American family who looked at my family picture, and that American family saw a big family picture, and that family pointed at my face in the picture and said “We want to sponsor for this one; we want to adopt him, and if you agree within one year he will come to America and lived with us, with our family, we will raise him up and send him to school.” My father said “what is about him that you like, what about the other boys.” He said “No. I feel like having a connection with him” that was all. After my father came back from his study in 1972 which was also the fiery summer, he asked me “Hiêu, there is a family who wants to adopt you, do you want to go to America?” My answer at that time was with a little bit of pride: “I think one father is enough, two fathers is a little too many, never mind.” That’s when I was young, wasn’t it a pride of a child! I thought that I had to depend on my own and not depend on anyone for anything. If it’s right to do, do it, and if it’s not just don’t do it.
TVD: Let go back and talk a little bit about your education. You already completed your senior year of high school. Would you tell me a little about your study experience, what subject did you like the most, and how were the teachers and friends?

AT: For that when talking about that time I was in Vietnam, during the sixth to the eighth grade it was just normal nothing special. When I came to ninth grade, for some unknown reasons, either I loved to play or loved to play soccer, my study was going down badly. I realized that all of the sudden I was doing really bad. It was strange. Math was changed and other subjects were changed also, unlike when I was in elementary school when all the subjects were very familiar to me. I began to sit down and study, studied and tried to find out why. After six months I became one of the top five in the class. From 10th, 11th, and 12th grade I changed my schedule to the morning class, and I didn’t know why I became quiet and didn’t want to talk anymore. When I met my friends probably after six months, when we came to 10th grade we had to change our sections A,B,C. Section A studied natural science, section B studied math, section C cared more about philosophy. I studied section B which was math. Probably because of environmental change, friends went to different sections, and in the class I became quiet and didn’t want to talk anymore, but only studied and do homework. From 10th to 12th grade, I was one of the top 5 in the class. I have an ability that I can study a lot and quick, because each study program of the board was for one year, especially math, it only took me 3 summer months to finish the whole program, and when I came to school, I was only sitting there playing or found some other books which had more maths to solve.

TVD: Did you have teachers who encouraged you?

AT: Actually it was not that they encouraged me in my study, because I encouraged myself and being self discipline. However, there was a physics teacher whose name I forgot, later on when
the communists took over, when we had about 3 to 4 months before the exam. When he tried to solve an equation of velocity in space according to some vector, and no one could solve it. He asked me “Hieu can you do it?” I said yes. It not that I used the formula from my head, but I used the formulas from a whole chapter of a book which written from the beginning to the end, and if there is anyone who had been to Petrus Ký school would know that the black board there was very long, and it took 2 boards like that. I wrote from the beginning to the end applied those formulas, and I got the answer. He knocked his head and said “you did well, when the communists came and things were troubled like that, yet you’re keeping up with your study like this” I answered him “it’s not that, but I have studied ahead of time, and now the formulas are in my head already.” There was another memory, the teacher who taught me math I didn’t remember his name, but this one I do remember. There’s memory with Mr. Hieu Đức Lâm. He was a literature teacher in the school. There was a day when they had an English eloquent speech, which took place thru out all the county Vietnam at that time, and all high schools selected their represent students, and the contest needed about 4 months to prepare, and my father was the one who wrote the speech. He wrote and I read and studied. When all people in the school gathered together and contestants went up, and when I went up there, and after I spoke, I got the second place. I was surprised to see that the one who got the first place didn’t speak better than I did, but somehow I got the second prize. When things were over, I asked people to find out, and I went to talk to the principle. The answer was that the skill of the one who took the first place was about at the level of 3, and the skill of Trần Hieu was at 10 which meant 7 levels higher than the other one. However, Hieu personality was unteachable, and those like him need more training. Those who involved discussed amongst themselves in the teachers’ meeting saying that this Hieu has a great pride that I’m afraid that it’s impossible to teach him. That was
the words of Mr. Khiêu Đức Lâm, a literature teacher in Petrus Ký, and that was true, I might get
the first or the second place in a national contest, but I didn’t know why he saw in me the pride
and afraid. That’s neat. Isn’t it?

TVD: Let me ask you a few questions about your family. Why did your family go from Đà
Nẵng to Huế then to Sài Gòn? What year did you come to Saigon?

AT: Actually I don’t remember, but after my father came out from military foreign language
institute, and he began to work with his license as a lawyer, and that was when my family moved
to Saigon. I remember that I was about 10 years old, and I was in fifth grade at one of the
schools in Saigon. At that time the whole family moved there already, and if you want to know
exactly what year, I probably have to do some math.

TVD: May be around 67-68?

AT: I don’t think so. Yeah! Around that time, the Mậu Thân (the monkey) New Year was 68,
and we came before 68. I was there when 68, Mậu Thân came, but I was little, and only heard
helicopters shot down to Gò Vấp area. I was sitting in the patio of the upper level of the house
and saw the shooting, and I’ve only heard the gunshots, but I didn’t see anyone die.

TVD: When came to Saigon, where did your family live?

AT: We lived across the street from Phú Thọ College, right on Tò Hiền Thành Street.

TVD: How were your neighbors?

AT: Neighbors were the officers, majority was the officers, and those houses were provided for
military officers of Republic of Vietnam. Most of those houses were later sold out to the public,
and that’s a different story, but before they were for the high ranking officers like captains, and
lieutenant.

TVD: How was yours?
AT: The house was about 5 meters wide, and that was one of the officer’s quarters, 50-60 meters deep, and later on my father added about 10 meters to it, and in the back it had an attic.

TVD: And the whole family of 10 children with Dad and Mom?

AT: Yes, all stayed there.

TVD: Were there any grandparents?

AT: No, just the family.

TVD: And April 1975, where were you at that time, the last days of the South? Did you remember anything?

AT: I remember many things. On the 30\textsuperscript{th} of April I was staying at home. Before April 30\textsuperscript{th}, around the 29\textsuperscript{th} of April, my father took all of the family and left. At that time I didn’t want to go, so I stayed there.

TVD: Where did he take your family to?

AT: I didn’t know where, somewhere that he thought it might be safe. Later on I learned that he took them to the home of one of his friends who was a shoemaker. Because he thought that if he stayed home, and people knew that his home was a home of an officer, so when the communists come, they might do something to him. I didn’t want to leave. I stayed home, and because of that, our home was not robbed by those who took the advantage of the trouble. I was about 17-18 at the time, but I didn’t know where I got the aggressiveness within me.

TVD: Only you remained home?

AT: Yes, only me. Guns that people abandoned outside on the street, and before that my father already taught me how to shoot, strip and reassemble firearms. Because there were 2 colts and one cabin in the house, and I was in charge of polishing them, and I knew the basic of shooting, and later on I met with some of the soldiers, and they taught me how to shoot too. When that
day came, I picked an RN15 home, carefully prepared and tried to shoot a few shots into the air then I put it there. Those who took the advantage of the coming of the communists, and all the other’s houses they took everything already, and when they came to my home, I told them not to come in, and that “go away, the owner of this home is still here.” There was a young tough looking man holding a wrecking bar to pry the door to get in, then I went to the corner to fetch the gun, and I told him “if you get in, I’ll shoot you.” He said “you’re just a lad, you dare to shoot me?” and I actually shot him, but perhaps I wasn’t good enough that it hit the ground. I don’t know what had happened or whether he died if I was good at it. After I pulled the trigger I realized and was telling myself that how could you look at a person like that was able pull the trigger, and I came to realize that my purpose was to protect what we had rather than try to kill him. Nevertheless, the action was unclear as it was of a young boy. When they saw a young boy fired a gunshot, they all ran away, and when I came out, I didn’t see anyone anymore. I was not yet numbered amongst the murderers.

TVD: And that was on the 29th?
AT: Around the 29th. After liberation there were many things that happened, and they were like something that gave emotions. For instance, my father left, one day he left in the afternoon around 1-2 pm, and it was drizzling, and my mother was hugging him.

TVD: Where did he go?
AT: Go to prison. All the children were taking a nap after lunch, and I sneaked a peak to see how he went. From that day I began to realize that our future was very gloomy. I didn’t think that my father would be able to come back. Before that I had learned taekwondo with a teacher for about 7-8 years. I meditated, and learned the principles that needed to use. I learned quite a bit and with the craziness of my youth, and resentfulness. Launched into life, many things to
accomplish, and I’m still proud of myself that I didn’t do anything bad even though there might be times that I’ve fought, and might be something that was not pleasant going on, but I didn’t do anything that came from malice. I might have done things with wrath. At the same time, I taught that to a number of young men who wanted to learn. I also had mistakes in my teaching, because of the intrepid, because of the nimble and uncontrolled will that was unable to endure disgrace circumstances and died.

TVD: Can you please talk a little more details with examples?

AT: For example, I had a boy, a son of a parachuting Lieutenant, he was very generous. When I was with him, people thought that we were brothers because we looked alike. That was one of my students whom I taught taekwondo for, and he improved very fast, because he thought that with his taekwondo skill and determination he would be able to do something for his family, and able to change the circumstances so to speak. He was young, you know, crazy and resentful. He was very good, within one year, he became skillful. He was just like me at that time. At the time we did loading and carrying work, so he carried water for living. He did that in the ice plant, and there were a bunch of hooligans there, and they tried to take away his job and beaten up his friends. Said that go outside for a few minutes, and at that time, the young men, children of the imprisoned officers, got together in groups to go to work. For example, I was working as a loader and that one, he carried ice, and for some other, they carried timber. Didn’t go to school and with our parents’ situation, without money and if we didn’t work like that what else could we do!? We only had to spend our strength to labor. With such taekwondo skill and seeing his friends being beaten up he couldn’t stand it, so finally he dashed out and fought. In the neighborhood there were more than a dozen people who he beat up, and his friends who were beaten left him and went home. In that area, there were call houses, they were watched by the ruffians before, but
after the incident they sent a messenger to ask him to come and watch that area for them to keep them from being disturbed. Therefore unintentionally he became a gang leader. When I heard about that, I told him not to do so “even though you have a good heart, and with your practice, if you head in that direction, you will slowly be debauched. Just leave them alone and let them mind their own business, you should get out of there.” He listened to me and got out of that place. When he came back he found himself a job as an industrial worker and worked as a normal person. After that he was called by the communists to render military service, to join the army. He asked me whether he should go, and I replied saying “it’s up to you. Now the country is like that, so do whatever it’s easy and best for you.” He told me that he wanted to dodge, so he left to the countryside, and his mother gave the money to the partisans so that they wouldn’t bother him, because it was obvious to people that at his age, he should be in the service and not there. People knew. The partisans kept coming to trouble, and his mother had to work hard to earn money to give to the partisans. Eventually he couldn’t stand anymore, he took a bottle of insecticide and went out to his father tomb, the family graveside, and he drank it there, and he died. However, when he was just took the first sips, and his body turned red, the people who were working there in the field saw, and they ran to him and took him home. When he was at home, people heard him said “brother Hiệu, I cannot wait.” So at his funeral which closed to Saigon, his mother and his friends were there. She asked “is there anyone here whose name is Hiệu?” and I stood up saying that that’s me, and she asked “what are you boys, waiting for?” I told her probably he was being delirious and said that and that we didn’t wait for anything. At that time in Vietnam, after the communists took over, there were friends, and as young people who love to hang out, party and dancing, and called their classmates to come with females students from Gia Long School, came and danced. There was a friend in the class who dance tango very well, but a week later
they got the news that he died, and not only him died, but also his dancing partner. Later on they learned that he had joined a locally formed resistant war, and that was the reason why he died. There have been many memories, but this is the first time I ever talked about it.

TVD: You’ve mentioned earlier that before 1975 you had learned taekwondo for a long time, 7-8 years. Did your family send you to study or did you choose to study?

AT: The situation was that not because my family sent me, but rather it was a coincident. It began with when I was young, about 11-12 years old, when I did about 3 pushups, my heart already pounded hard, and if I didn’t wear a shirt, people would see my rib cage moved up and down, and when I ran for about 20 steps, my face turned pale, and gasped for breath. My father took me to the Doctor, and the Doctor said that I had congenital enlarged heart. I didn’t understand, but I just heard that’s what it was. I didn’t know what congenital enlarged heart meant, but obviously my heart couldn’t handle my activities. I was very upset and telling myself that a person like this, yet not able to do those things, and with such a heart, the doctor wouldn’t allow me to do anything heavy, I rather die. So I began as a young boy, made myself a weightlifting chair, using two tin cans I put a stick thru them and practiced in the garden. There was a time that I was practicing, and the chair collapsed, the tin cans were on my body, so my father asked his friends to make me another chair. When I was 14, Petrus Ký School had a club by the school gate, and I was often talked thru people’s hat. Sometime there was no class due to teachers being sick or so, and then we would have two hours off to go out, but only around in the school yard, not totally out of the campus. I was talking through the ladies’ hat, those who worked in the canteen in that club then I would sneaked out thru the back and got out to the Korean park to hang out there. The Korean park located near Petrus Ký School. I was out there at a Chinese café, staying there drinking coffee. Coincidently, I met a teacher. He came and he
didn’t say anything. He was a sculptor. I asked him “do you want some coffee?” but he kept standing there, and well, you would supposed he wanted something to drink right!? He sat down and said “you’re weak. You should learn taekwondo, and not to worry much because you’re a young man.” And from that day forward, step by step he taught me, and actually, I didn’t know what his name was. Sometime he taught me. He told me to go home and practice breathing, keep doing and I would be healthier. For about two or three months, and when I had some free time again, I would go out there and met him, so he could teach me some more. He told me that he had no school to do the demonstration like other teachers, but he asked me what I wanted to learn, and I told him that I wanted to learn taekwondo. He said that’s easy, just buy a book and learn from there. I told him how I could I be good at it if I just learn from the book, but he told me to go ahead and did. I listened to him and practiced. I looked at the book and saw the pictures of punches and kicks and I followed. He told me to combine those poses and he would help me with mistakes or weaknesses. I began from the scale of 0-10, 0 being no strength, and 10 being strong. The taught me the movements, the principle of taekwondo, meditate about those things until it became real and then practiced. So actually I studied taekwondo with principle and applied into reality. Not until the end when liberation came when my teacher taught me about the practice, breathing exercises, breathing control and the secrets thereof. Because according to his opinion, thoughts are not invisible, but a matter; therefore, in order to have lift up a thought, in order for the brain to develop we have to start from matters. It must be something that doable. At that time I asked him “communist is a matter, but no thought, so when talking about theory, it’s a theory, but where is the thought when you said that thought is matter, only pro-communist can control the communist.” He told me that I didn’t have to understand it, slowly I would be able to understand. So I continued to practice while other families moved to
Long Khánh, and had a group of young men to work as hireling men cutting sugar canes during season. I practiced whenever I had time during the day. At the beginning, I thought that taekwondo can help me to do anything, so I practiced with all my strength, very fast, strong, and accurate, yet I realized that it didn’t help me, then I practiced internal strength. I practiced to the point that people consider it’s mystery, which means I could cut the air, kick objects, but I still felt that my brain was still stupid and entangled. So slowly I went thru again what he had taught me, when I came across that, then I would know, step by step. After that, I decided to practice vegetarianism for three years in order to practice. So eventually, it came to a point that I decided to apply…and I thought that a person has to be self-imposed austerity, alone and isolated to the outside world in order to practice wouldn’t work, but has to interact and mingle with life in order to have a good result. Let’s imagine that one would go to the temple, shave his head, has a vegetarian’s diet and be quiet in order to have this, that’s he has a different point of view about life already. So I decided to live in the open world, live a life that has everything including foolishness and all other experiences. So that had the two side effects, and from thence, people can solve problems. After that time, I applied this technique to human, and now those people are still living, practicing and having result.

TVD: Is your family Buddhist? is religion part of your life?

AT: The situation is like this. My family was Buddhist, and later on one of my younger sister got married and converted to Protestant, and they were Buddhist just like any Buddhist worshiper in here, who believed in Buddha to protect them, and he would give them peace, and when full moons come, they practice vegetarian diet to contemplate, and that means they meditate on one thought that they want to seek peace in that faith. That’s something different. After practice for awhile, and I only mentioned my practice to those who interested in practicing,
and those I felt that it was necessary to help them with their lives, other than that I didn’t talk much about that, because people didn’t want to make their way in faith. This sounds might be offensive, those who believes that human have a definite freedom which is impossible, because they hold on to a thought to live rather than having a true freedom. Why?! Because as long as they still have a thought that thought is invisible, they’re wrong. Because it actually visible, because this might be out of the subject a little bit, if we say it invisible, how could it change a body like mine or yours to act accordingly, but it’s visible in a different way, only want to erase it, in order to lift it up we have to have a unique vision with its frequency, and from thence we work. That becomes a pro-communist isn’t it?

TVD: So you said that you began to teach martial arts after 1975?

AT: After 75, I began to teach for a few people, and usually those were the ones who already knew martial arts or martial arts instructors, and not just martial arts students, because my way of teaching was the same like my teacher, and that I only talked to them, and they, themselves would fine their own techniques to applied to what they’ve learned. If one follows exactly the same instruction for a long period of time would be dangerous, so they had to find their own way depended on their strength. Thus, when I taught, I only talked and didn’t act, and there was none of my students who’ve seen my demonstration except the positions that I showed them, so they can see their own position.

TVD: At that time, you’ve said that you had to work for living?

AT: Yes. I also worked at that time, many things. Carrying, pushing the coal carts. I did everything that not illegal.

TVD: Those were the jobs that you had to find or how did you get them?
AT: At the beginning, there was a group of the children of the imprisoned officers, entered a construction company as a group and worked on the construction site. After awhile, when the group ran out of jobs to do, we went and carried trash. They were not trash like garbage, but in Vietnam at that time, people separated papers for recycles. We got those and sold them. We packed them in chunks, and we loaded them on a truck to take them to Thủ Đức where a paper factory was, and since we were in group. We subcontracted, and in the morning, 2 people would come to one place, and 3 people would go to another place, and while working, if there was any problem with anyone, I would be the one who solved the problems, there were many problems in that area.

TVD: What’s problem?

AT: Because when it comes to prices, the mediators, and those who had worked there before, the gangster, they price squeezed, raised the price up that the owner had to accept, otherwise no one would do it. When I came, I set a reasonable price. I did it one step at a time, other groups couldn’t do it, so I let people come in an worked, when I got to know them, then I would rise my price up to theirs. They argued, and we talked with words, then with actions.

TVD: How many in your family were working at that time?

AT: Almost everyone in the family worked, but my younger sisters didn’t do the job that I did, but there were jobs like put labels on paper bags which they could take home to do. They made rosaries, or made door and window shades using plastic tubes, or there was a time that they made bicycle tires. They would sit and arrange the threads, one by one on the rubbers so they can press and make tires. Most of my sisters did that kind of works. As for my mother, she had a teashop, and we also had a rice field in Đồng Khánh, and I had to come there to work when season came.
VAOHP0090 19

TVD: Earlier you’ve mentioned that after April, 30th, 1975 your father was imprisoned. Did your family have a chance to visit and feed him?

AT: One month after the communists came, my father was sent to a prison camp, and not until about five or six years later when my father was visited. The time before that, and after that we only sent gifts and food to him, food that my mother made, dry provisions by mails.

TVD: So did your family receive any news about your father?

AT: Once in awhile we would get a letter. It seemed that they allowed him to write a letter every month or every other month.

TVD: So did you remember in that time, the news, or the contexts in those letters?

AT: I didn’t read much of those letters, because all of those letters were to write about what to send, and about love, homesick…Life in there off course miserable, only the first two letters, but the later ones didn’t need to say about that anymore, and so just to send me this and that, and about how they moved him to different camps, where to send the stuff to. Generally, it was more about things to send.

TVD: Did you go to visit your father? Or just your mother did?

AT: Only my mother went with my younger sisters. I didn’t go.

TVD: So did you know the living condition in the camp?

AT: I did. First of all, I had friends who came back from there, and secondly, there were things to do that I had to go by that area, so I got to know. The last time when my father was at Hòa Bình Sơn, other than that, as for the prison camps, with the jobs that I had to go thru mountains and jungles, I got to know just by looking.

TVD: Later when he was moved, where did your father go? In what camp did he stay for the longest time?
AT: Actually, I didn’t pay much attention to that part, but I only knew that he went to prison and was moved, but I didn’t know what camp or in what area. I didn’t pay attention to the details.

TVD: How long was your father served totally?

AT: About 13 or 14 years.

TVD: So he came back to the family in 87?

AT: He came back round 87 or 88.

TVD: So did you remember at that time what were you doing? Where, and the situation in the family?

AT: Because during that time, I was hardly home. I only stayed at my friends’ homes, or went to places; I only came home once a year or 2-3 times a month to check on my younger siblings. I didn’t like to stay home because staying at home I wasn’t able to do anything. Later on, 1-2 years before my father came back, two of my older brothers, one lived in America, one lived in Australia sent us money to live, so the situation was ok when my father came back.

TVD: When your father came back, did you come home to live with your family or did you continue to live alone?

AT: I continued to live independently, and seldom had I come home. Because first of all if I had come back to live together, I was not able to do anything, in the other hand, there were things need to be done outside, so I stayed away from home and only came back to have a meal or to rest for about a week and left again, for that reason my father kept questioned me, but I didn’t answer him.

TVD: After 13 years, did your father change?

AT: Actually, he was thinner and older, but really he didn’t change that much. He spent more time to sit and think, because my father was the one who easily accept life circumstances, and
hardly resist although he was well at his study and had patient, but it seemed that he tried to protect himself and be a shield to his children rather than resist or against.

TVD: What did your father do when he came back?

AT: After he came back from prison, he worked as a director an English translation team in a center to translate some kind of articles to English in Saigon.

TVD: Did your father talk to your family about his experiences in the prison camps?

AT: He probably did at home, but I didn’t have the opportunity to listen to it since I was not home.

TVD: In the 80s, there were many Vietnamese families migrated already, and you had two in your family already went. Did they? By what mean did they go?

AT: They left before the communists took over and not after. Two of my brothers, one in Australia, and one in America, they went with the study abroad programs and didn’t not escape by boat.

TVD: Did your family want to leave during that period of time?

AT: During the liberation time?! Everybody wanted to go not just my family. Who wouldn’t want to live that way, but we didn’t have the way, so we had to remain there and suffer.

TVD: Had your family ever tried to escape?

AT: No. First of all, we didn’t have enough money, and there was a time, a period of time that I was so mad that I was from a guide became an organizer for escaping, so eventually, I organized a last trip for my family to leave, but it was unsuccessful with a very silly reason. So when I was in prison, I realized that I couldn’t do that, it seemed that there was something that hindered from doing that, and I just let it go.

TVD: Why the trip was unsuccessful?
AT: It was unsuccessful because after I organized other trips, lead people went out nicely, and money paid at maturity. So I organized the last trip, in that last trip, the boat was nice, good engines, and was armed with weapons just in case we face the patrol we would fight back. It was two more days for us to leave, so that day I went there to check and prepare for the last time, and organize things to be ready. I was on my way there, so there was group that organized right in the area that I was about to pass by. They stopped me, and the communist troops came and stopped the buses, and they arrested all young men to interrogate. At that time they held me for almost a whole month, and everything had to stop, and when things were stopped like that, the helper, although I didn’t trust him, and I knew that he would be tray me, and eventually he did. He took everything with him, but those passengers whom I were to take, said they wouldn’t step down to the boat without me, and those people left, and I don’t know whether they were alive or dead. I thought that was such a nonsense thing because it was on the way that something else happened. That was not a failure but a fate that didn’t allow me to do.

TVD: So that’s why you didn’t escape?

AT: I went with the HO (Humanitarian Organization) program later on.

TVD: Do you remember anything about that list or experience that your family went with HO program?

AT: Because later on, life seemed to be more settled, and then I applied to work at Hòa Bình theater, and slowly I became an assistant in a line of business there, and the reason why I got in Hòa Bình theater was by cheating only. I convinced and won favor, and used my time and strength to work in that family to help healing sickness for one of his children, so that person appreciated my heart, so he introduced me to work there. Because in Hòa Bình theater, there were only full party members or candidate members of the party or members of an communist
organization, and I wasn’t any of those. But later on, because of that the one who introduced me lost his position with the city. So let’s talk about HO list, I didn’t want to do anything anymore. Whoever did whatever they like, as for me, I just let things follow the current. Actually, the HO file I only signed it, and whoever, wrote whatever, I only signed, I didn’t write anything. That was because of being too tired of living, and didn’t want to do anything. That was when the communists came, for three months I didn’t talk to anyone and isolated myself in an attic, and there were a lot of books. Books on bookcases stood against all the walls. I began to read one by one from the beginning to the end, for a few thousands of books. I didn’t go out and didn’t talk to anyone except going to school, finish school and came back, went and took the exam and came back. My father thought I was near to become crazy, which actually true. How could I not crazy since the whole plan for the future was turned upside down. For example, we’re wearing a nice outfit like this, and take a cup of water and pour on it, it would just be a little surprise. So when the list came out I didn’t understand how it worked. When I stepped up to the airplane, whatever will be, will be.

TVD: So you left in 1992, didn’t you?

AT: Left in 1992 in September.

TVD: A whole family?

AT: Yes, with my whole family, and one of my younger brother stayed behind to keep the house.

TVD: Did you have someone sponsor at that time?

AT: I had a brother here. Because didn’t do much, didn’t find out that couldn’t ask anything anymore. It seemed that there are a number of people, father or mother, the father is the same, and the mother was sponsored over. I didn’t much pay attention.

TVD: What city did you arrive in America?
AT: Riverside, California.

TVD: Why did you come to Riverside?

AT: Because first of all, in Riverside I had an uncle who is a protestant pastor. Therefore, my brother and my uncle wanted my family to stay somewhere around there, so we can be close to him so to speak, and my brother was afraid to have us live down here.

TVD: Where’s here?

AT: In Orange County where there were gangs and such. I lived in Riverside for about 3-4 months when the public assistant was running out. I think the support was for 6 months or so. I went to look for a job, but jobs over there were to work for business centers or malls, but my English was so bad, and as a Vietnamese who just came with dark skin and not so handsome so to speak, who were going to hire?! So I contacted here and there, and I had a friend in Orange county area, so I came here. He took me around, and I saw that there were many Vietnamese here, so I open the newspapers and saw that there were many jobs for assemblers or so, so I decided to go. I came home and had a meeting with my family, told them the situation that we had only two months of public assistant left, and that I had been seeking for a job for more than one month now and no one hires me, since my English is so good (sarcastically) that people didn’t understand how could they hire. Now I decided to move to Santa Ana, at that time we didn’t know there is Westminster, we only knew Santa Ana. As for my brother, first of all, in that area there were many gangs, and second thing was that he didn’t have money for down payment for rent, and another thing was that we closed to our uncle there. So my uncle answered saying that there were gangs there. Whether he worried that gangs would harm us or we would join the gangs, I didn’t have to worry because I was able to take care of them if they get involved. I’m not a meek man. Second reason was no money; I said I had money, the money that I gave to
my friend to keep before we came to America, because I knew that he would leave first, so I sent
the money with him first to keep it for me. Because when I left, I didn’t know what might
happen at the airport, so I sent the money to my friend thru the different way, so that I would
have it back when I got to America. It was $5000, so we went there and made it a down payment
for a rental house. The third reason was to be close to my uncle. I’m sorry to say that I’d not
been closed to anyone since I growing up. I don’t need to be close to anyone to ask for help for
anything. Therefore my brother’s three reasons I put aside. It was just how the family thought at
the moment, leave or stay, raise your hand if you want to go, we move next week. Whoever
wanted to stay, just stayed, so my mother, my three younger sisters and one younger brother
stayed. Me and my other siblings left.

TVD: Where is your father?
AT: He’s living with me now, but as for my father, he said that whatever we wanted to do, just
do it. We’re all grown up already. So when we moved here, my brother agreed to rent a house
and we came to stay. Within just one week, we all got a job. For my younger sisters stayed there.
They had a small Vietnamese community there, and from here took the job from the and brought
it there for them to sew, so my sisters told me can we come now. I said why not. We didn’t think
that we would keep sewing for the rest of our lives. Now one graduated in computer field, one is
a pharmacist, and one studied something about marketing and is working for AT&T.

TVD: Your career in America, what have you done?
AT: As for job, I did many things. When I first came I worked as an assembler, when I was tired
of that and there were something to do, I had to go back to Vietnam, then I went to Australia,
when I went there, I didn’t know what to do, so I worked as a driver delivered for business
offices, if I have to put down on my resume now, I would remember what, so I had to find
document. Drove car to deliver auto parts for awhile then I tired of that, then I went and learn to drive big trucks. I did that for 2-3 years because I like to travel, and I like to travel around United States and got paid which was great. Later on, I got tired and lazy, then I applied and work in Irvine, also assembler’s job, but after a month, I became a leader. Got unemployed, after being unemployed for awhile, then I read American newspapers, I saw that there was an American lady who seeking for personal assistant, I went for an interview and she hired me. While working for her, I studied cosmetology, and now do haircut.

TVD: Where do you work now?

AT: I do hair cut right here in Westminster.

TVD: So you still live in Orange County?

AT: I’m still living in Orange County, right here in Westminster.

TVD: Besides doing haircut, do you do anything else?

AT: Besides doing haircut, I do other things, but the other job I have no profit, no income. Because it was by chance that one of my friends took me to Sùng Niên Buddhist temple to teach qigong. I thought I might as well do that since I’m old and near the end, just teach other, so I did. During the time I live here in America, I also taught a couple of people, and they were successful. For instant, there was an elderly man, about 78 years old, still healthy. But I keep teaching the way that my teacher has taught me, I just came there, look, and show them. Later on I teach Sùng Niên. Actually, I teach just because I want to teach rather than doing it as a career.

TVD: Is that a hoppy?

AT: It’s not a hoppy. Because I thought, for example that I’m smart and not stupid, but why I don’t go to school, graduate and make money for living. I don’t think that way. I don’t want to have a normal life and that is to get married, have a happy family, then fight, pay the bills,
eventually went to the hospital, inject the medicine and die. I don’t like that way. If I can’t do anything, I still have a word “disengaged.” Now I just do haircut and I live with that income whatever that might be, freely enjoy the scenery and the weather, and if the opportunity doesn’t come, or no one understands my study subject, then I will let it go. However, that’s not something that my teacher predicted before, so now I just keep doing that, even just one or two people I would teach or three. Because I thought that each one has a hidden talent, and when those talents connected and when I teach one person, I teach everyone, and vice versa when you teach everyone, you teach just one. So that’s why like to study, busy and leave, some people come and leave. There are some coincident as you’ve seen.

TVD: Are you married?

AT: I married once longtime ago. Often people like to say “longtime ago.” “Longtime ago” because in my brain I don’t want to keep anything for memories. As you’ve known that often memories make us feel uncomfortable. There was a lady whom I dated before 1992, before I came here. I dated her for 3-4 years, so when I came here, when you’re in love, you have to suffer right? Even thought the pain will ease, but because of the promise, I had to marry her, we married late, and she didn’t want to come here because life had changed. In the working and living environment, she met another person, so our marriage was over. I’m not sad about it, and it had a feeling that I had a burden, and it’s good to leave it behind.

TVD: So you got married in Vietnam, is that right?

AT: Yes, in Vietnam.

TVD: When the wedding proceeds, there were rituals of the family to follow, did you do all of those?
AT: When I went back to Vietnam to do that, I had to have everything, except without my parents, only my uncle and his wife represented.

TVD: That’s your side right? What about her side?

AT: My side, her parents were there.

TVD: At the wedding, did you wear western clothes, or the traditional Vietnamese clothes with áo dài khăn dồng? (Vietnamese traditional wedding dress set)

AT: The bride wore áo dài khăn dồng, I wore western clothes.

TVD: Since you came here in 1992, and it seemed that you have experienced many different stages like going to school and continue to build and keep the family with your siblings. How is the relationship in your family, are your siblings get along well? Are your parents still alive?

AT: My father passed away about 4 years now, and my mother still living. We, the children in the family always care for each other and love each other. We hardly had problem to fight or argue, and if there is any, it would be a small thing. In my family we have a characteristic that normally if nothing happen, then it’s ok, but when something happen to one of us, the whole family would get together to find solution, and often I would be the one who make decision.

TVD: Would you please tell a little more about your position in the family?

AT: For example, I’m hardly home, it’s just my habit of hanging outside to enjoy things or writing or something like that, I don’t know, but I hardly come home. So for instant, I have a younger sister, who felt in love with a young man, who’s protestant, and he seems to have no communication skill, so it’s easy to offend others. Thus, the whole family opposes her married plan. At that time I was working as an interstate truck driver, and I heard about my sister. She called and cried to me, so I told her I’ll take care of that for you. So I met with the young man and talked to him that in my family you should be like this, you should change the way you talk
to people, and don’t keep on doing the way you’ve done. I also went to meet his mother, and told her that if she loved her son, whenever I told her to come, she should come and do according to what I wanted her to do. Then I began a campaign at home to work with my family too. One by one, I would reason with them if they didn’t listen to me. If it didn’t work by emotion influence then I would reason. Reason was for something simple, since everyone is an adult, whoever didn’t want to listen can turn around, and everyone had the right to do so. I used emotion influence to talk to my mother, when my mother seemed to agree, I called the boy’s mother to come and talked. So eventually, they got married. I also have a younger brother, there was something happened in his in-law’s family when his father in law fell and broke his rib, it wasn’t that my brother hit him, but they did that to trap him and get him in jail, so that his wife could keep the house. When they called the police and the police arrested him and took him to jail. When I was driving and heard of that, I searched on the internet, then spent money, but I didn’t have a house, I put out the money, and asked the siblings in the family, who had a house, give up his house, I put money. Within a few hours my brother got out of jail. Basically, whenever there is something important or danger in the family, then I would involve, other than that, only when there is something to eat.

TVD: Does your family celebrate the holidays of the year, the times that family would get together?

AT: That we do. New Year and holidays, we would have parties in each different one home, and mother would be the cook.

TVD: Which are the most important holidays of your family?

AT: That’s another story. To me, no holiday is important, I don’t know why, but to me every holiday to me are the same. As for my family, Tết (Vietnamese New Year) is the most important.
To me they are just the same, nothing different. Perhaps I deny the past too much or somehow I don’t know, but I don’t have any memory.

TVD: If you have something to say about your future, what are your hope for yourself, what goal do you want achieve?

AT: I don’t need that for myself, because I’m not rich, nothing, no obligation including family, property, I don’t need. Because I have enough for living right now, I have a car to commute, and if I want to travel somewhere, I just go. However, the last thing I want to do is, not that want it just now, but 30 years ago, that is to popularize hoài nhiên qigong to help others to be better.

I’m also write the hoài nhiên qigong book, this is not a Buddhist sutras book, but a book that people would need, just some of it can prove that step by step people will find that illness in their mind and body would recovered quickly.

TVD: So is that what you’ve learned from one of your teachers you mentioned earlier right. So could you please tell a little more about that study?

AT: The content of it is about human, people would consider a human as a physical thing, like muscles, blood, everything, and when they get sick, they take medication. However, in this study, human is considered as a battery because it only needs the balance to hold the electric in the body, and we use that to do other things in the body. Science proved that in a cell, inside is negative, and outside is positive, and so all the activities and movements of human body is the process of electric, the circulation of electric, and so when we intake food, meat converted into protein called glucose, those are the result produced by electric. And if the body is not enough electric for electrify, the person would die. The circle of that electric people think it is great, but actually it just electrolyzes. As for other qigong I don’t want to mention, but all of the practice regarding breathing, lifting, and the main thing is to balance electric first. Just like a car, it
doesn’t matter how good it is, and if the battery is not good, the car cannot operate. So the key point of this qigong is to recharge the body’s battery, and when we talk about battery, we know that it’s very important. All our thoughts, all the command from the brain to muscles, and the reacts from muscles back are functioned by electric. There is a section I mentioned in Hoài nhiên quigong and that is just imagine a person like you who know English and Vietnamese.

Now can you try to think in Chinese?

TVD: No.

AT: You can’t think in Chinese means you’re stupid right? Not really. So that electric called electrolyze, transforms into a memory then thought, therefore the thought is electric. But what the Buddhist said? You have to resolve, you have to be outside of the thought to resolve, then look back in to it to see the thought, then can’t hold it, whatever, but forget that that’s electric. If it’s electric, we have to use battery to solve the problem, but from where? Just take a look at this life, if we have no electric, we can’t do anything. We have to live in the stage like we lived in the ancient time, no computer, no phone, just that, right? So the same with human, the main point here is electric, có nhiều chứ trường sinh học, electro-affinity, or bioelectric, but now everybody wonder how we recharge that kind of electric, and that is the function of human body, all the functions of the body automatically work, because human body able to do so. That’s the most basic theory which I’ve applied for other people, and their improvements were great. Why?

When a person eats a chunk of meat and if it does not digest into protein, then it’s not good, the body did not receive it yet. That’s the electrolyzing. Electrolyzing is not something simple, just imagine that in this side is a piece of gold and the other side is a piece of iron, the process of electrolyzing can take a piece of gold to this side. Therefore, in this qigong, the important key is to recharge the electric in order to continue working, otherwise one cannot transform from
invisible to visible. Now a piece of gold here, and a piece of iron here, when the gold piece dissolved and moved to this side, you can’t see the molecules moving, but did it actually move? Just see the result then you know that it’s moved, but you didn’t see the trace. That’s this qigong. Visible is invisible, and invisible is visible. That’s why if you want, you can be iron, if you don’t want, you’re ironless. That’s in Bát Nhã Tương Kinh of Buddha, that’s not reasoning.

TVD: Do you meditate in this qigong? Does it have any part in this?

AT: Meditation is the fundamental of this qigong. Meditate to find out how much electric you have in your body. This electric we’re talking about is not the environmental electricity, but this electric comes from words, then into feelings, then becomes something that we want, we want power, that’s very complicated. But the theory is true. Meditate stays in a movement; one has to move constantly, and what happens if you stop. Meditate required the higher recognition. When you sit, inhale and exhale, you can’t called it meditate, that’s just practicing qigong, but if you inhale, exhale with your eyes closed until you forget inhale and exhale, that’s meditating. Meditate is to recognize what have been done for us, our action is forgotten. That’s meditation. And when we can perceive like that we can see the invisible in us, we consider that is something get into our body, which has a great effect to our mind, when we’re doing that, it’s gone. You can only understand it when you practice it. When you breathing until we unaware of it, and forget what we’ve been doing, then you would be able to see the invisible as the visible. If it’s not visible how can it be broken, so that’s meditation. Then after that, at the beginning it easily be lost, but that’s just the perception, we have to practice so that the electric would not be charged anymore, until it neutralized as one. When it become another block, when we no longer aware of it which is the feelings. At that point, the Buddhist would call it ści, ỏ, ố, ᴨ (happy, wrath, love, hatred (gamut of human feeling) then you would see the cause of those feelings, and
they become clearer each day rather than fading away. So when we see them clearer, that means invisible become visible, and from one visible it creates the other invisible, the more we do, the more we see, and the more we do, the healthier we become. Another thing is that when we reach to that level, there is a principle that whether the body makes the plan or the mind does, which one causes illness. Our mind causes illness, because now science proves that many deaths caused by psychology, yet caused car accidents is lower. Psychology kills human slowly, like when people got stress, or felt in love or something like that, that sort of things. While we practice like that we have the balance, one or two electric currents meet then thoughts would become knowledge, then language. However, this impulse remained in the body, stored there until a certain level, then slowly invisible become visible, strength disordered, when strength disorder completes it will destroy the internal organs. Then sickness comes to effect, now the problem is to neutralize the electric, neutralize the movements. Those are practical techniques rather than a theory, people have many theories, hundreds of libraries in the world, right!? But this is a practical technique to impulse, and from there neutralize again, and from there we get the balance for our bodies, begin the strong body. That’s the principle of this qigong.

TVD: In your work, do you pass this qigong on to the later generations for practice?

AT: That’s what I’m doing right now. I put all my effort to do that, write it out. I don’t know if I can make it known, but I just popularize it first, then we’ll see. If it’s correct, it will be accepted, but if not, there are many dumpsters.

TVD: We’re running out of time now, so let me ask you a last question. The purpose of this interview is mainly to make it a collection for our community, the Vietnamese Americans, and will be make known to the universities and colleges in many places, as well as to rebuild the community so that we could have a stronger voice, the special stories, and if we have a special
story about you to pass on, what do you want people to remember you when they think of you?

In another word, what is the legacy you want to pass on to the next generation?

AT: The wish of all my life is that I am able to pass on the qigong to everyone, with some little details, something to apply into life to make it better, nicer. That’s all.

TVD: Thank you very much!

AT: Thank you for the interview!