# Houston's Indo-Chinatown

## *The First Generation*

**Deborah Jensen**

As each work week ends, a transfusion begins: Houston slowly drains itself. By Sunday morning the process is nearly complete–the city utterly still, silent, and nearly empty. But 10–12 blocks south of downtown, and east along Jefferson or Webster avenues, dense clusters of Indochinese shops and restaurants begin to rouse, infusing the city with sounds, strange smells, and movement. Entire families cruise through restaurants and shopping centers: children play, men talk, and new-wave teens loiter in pool halls or video shops. The women shop the markets carefully – scrupulously – for the week's groceries. Shoppers are mostly Vietnamese, but there are also Laotians, Filipinos, Indonesians, Malaysians, Thais, Cambodians, and Chinese.

There are an estimated 40,000-60,000 Vietnamese, 3,500 Cambodians, 1,100 Laotians, and 700 Thais living and working in Houston – four to six hundred times the number a decade ago. While this massive influx has injected new life into the city's decayed limbs, its adrenalin effect is countered somewhat by traditional immigrant nostalgia. For many Indochinese refugees, emotional and economic investments here are tenuous. Building renovation and new construction are rare; businesses reflect the Indochinese struggle between present survival and future hope: returning to Vietnam. For some, a commitment to stay would be an admission of defeat.

The change came in 1975. Refugees had been trickling out of Saigon since the American troop withdrawal in 1973. After communist troops took the city in 1975, it grew into a tidal wave. By late 1977, a third of America's half-million Indochinese refugees settled in California. The next largest group came to Texas.

A central "corridor" of Vietnamese businesses extends southward from Drew Avenue to West Alabama, zig-zagging between Main and Milam streets. Aged shopping centers, small businesses, and restaurants are clumped together in tight, pod-like formations, flourishing in the older, vacant buildings of Houston's commercial orphanage.

### The Milam Center

The Milam Center, Trung Tâm Thuò`ng Mãi á Dông, is situated at the corridor's northern end, between Drew and Tuam, and Milam and Travis streets. Milam Center remains one of the largest and most popular shopping areas for Houston's Indochinese community. The 64-year-old building – a recycled-American, strip shopping center – occupies a single city block. Neither renovated nor updated, the building's exterior is simply encrusted with layers of the center's past: a sweeping theater marquee with remnants of an outdoor clock, walls plastered with Vietnamese posters and painted advertisements, paint peeling away multiple layers of ice-cream colors. Only the signboards – bright, dense, and heavily accented – reveal the center's current identity: Khai Thu's income tax service, Kim Hoan jewelry, Van Hu videotapes, Dr. Dung A. Nguyen, pharmacies, book stores, restaurants, market, shoe stores, and gift shops. In this single city block, the social, commercial, and cultural threads are woven tightly together – a maximum use of space that is characteristically Indochinese.

Milam Center shops and restaurants face out towards the street on three sides, with additional interior stores opening to a central, bench-lined hallway penetrating the center from the north. The T-shaped hall has access doors to the center's east and west sides. Vietnamese Muzak floats through the hall and into the interior spaces. One entire side of the corridor is a long window, revealing Hoa Binh (pronounced "Wah Been") Market. Just inside, huge slabs of meat and whole chickens hang, suspended over a steam table. The narrow aisles are crowded and the shelves over-stocked. Its merchandise reflects the market's diverse patronage: clear jars of pickled papaya and sweet bananas from the Philippines, Lotus nuts in syrup from mainland China, cans of ground bean sauce from Hong Kong, and French-Vietnamese coffee with chicory. Gigantic stalks of sugar cane lean against a front wall and little jelly candies from Japan, shaped into delicate seashells, win the prize for clever packaging. Glittering

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Buddhist paraphernalia shares precious space with mystifying cookware. There are infinite varieties of tea and homey trays of plastic-wrapped, sticky rice cakes. The latter sit atop cartons of cigarettes below the roach spray. It seems unlikely Hoa Binh Market would be mistaken for Safeway.

Lan Thi Pham, a tiny, delicate woman of 36, is one of Hoa Binh Market's regular shoppers, carefully calculating the week's food budget and menu long before venturing out with her family to faraway Milam Center. Lan and her husband, Son Nguyen, live and work in Southwest Houston, but most weekends, the family will shop in and around Milam Center, socializing and spending the day together. Like many Vietnamese refugees here, Lan and her husband work long hours, leaving little time for anything but the most immediate concerns of job, money, and security for their three children. Milam Center, both a commercial and social vortex, attracts Indochinese from all areas of the city.

Lan Thi Pham and Son Nguyen arrived in Houston on 4 August 1983, moving immediately into a two-bedroom apartment on West Main Street with Lan's grown brother, two sisters, and her three young children. They came separately, each refugee sponsoring the next. Lan's elderly parents remained behind. Lan is now employed by Foley's. Son Nguyen is a mechanical engineer by day and an auto-parts salesman at night. Both struggle with the isolation, exhaustion – and the language.

The terrifying escapes, long months of waiting, and painful assimilation are common experiences of uncommon terror shared by most of Houston's Indochinese. In 1980, most of these were "boat people:" 65 percent were Vietnamese, 21 percent Laotian, and 7 percent Cambodian. Frequently, escape attempts failed and were repeated several times. A single escape consumed several ounces of gold – often an entire family's savings. Over 30,000 died in the attempt, either from illness, pirate attacks, starvation, or boat sinkings. As Vietnamese priest Father Anthony Dao explains, many felt it would be "fresher to die at sea, rather than on land."

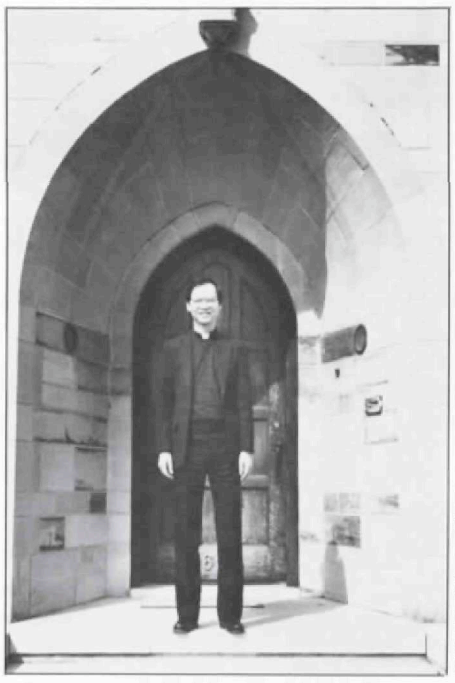
Chronicles of refugee experiences are found in the poetry and prose at The Milam Book Store on the center's west side. After browsing through the Milam Center's Book Store, one could walk across Drew Avenue, one block north to the Nam Thanh gift shop, then over Milam Street to Saigon Dich-Vu Center, dining at the Saigon Cafeteria after a fitting at Chinh's Tailor. Traveling two blocks east along Dennis Avenue, a walker arriving at Thu Do Plaza on Main Street could take a self-defense class upstairs, pick up "beer to go" at the Yen Gift Shop, and plan a vacation in the travel agency downstairs. Milam Center is surrounded by small, satellite shopping centers and restaurants huddled within blocks of one another. Buildings, like abandoned mollusk shells, are recycled and reinhabited. Often of single-story brick or cinder-block construction, these shopping centers are frequently unified by nothing more than paint color or camper-like aluminum roofs. They offer compact, multifunctional containers for multipurpose stores containing multiuse products – Vietnamese one-stop shopping.

### Holy Rosary Church

At the south end of this Indochinese business corridor, a chorus of Asian voices – high-pitched and slightly singsong – drifts faintly through the doors of a church out into the Sunday afternoon street: songs of devotion and worship, a traditional Catholic mass. One non-Asian visitor confesses that while he does not understand Vietnamese, he comes each Sunday for the high, sweet singing of the church choir.

Holy Rosary Church is a large edifice of Bedford stone built in 1933. It faces Milam Street on the west, sandwiched between Berry Avenue to the north and Holy Rosary Hall on Winbern Avenue to the south. The Church holds mass in English, Latin, and Vietnamese.

Each Sunday, Father Anthony Dao conducts Holy Rosary's two Vietnamese masses. In contrast to the gentle austerity of Holy Rosary's dimly lit interior, the incessant activity is startling: there is human traffic throughout the service – parents come and go with crying babies and restless children, teenagers scout for friends. Father Dao begins with a ritual plea for child control, asking parents to refrain from bringing infants. He is ignored. Families share every activity – shopping, eating, socializing, and worshiping together. Filial devotion is central to the Vietnamese culture.



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**Holy Rosary Church's Father Anthony Dao, a refugee, is widely respected for his extensive knowledge of both American culture and the Vietnamese experience.**

Some hands move rapidly over rosary beads while others are clasped to foreheads with rapid bowing – a strangely Buddhist gesture in this setting. The atmosphere is relaxed, comfortable, and tolerant of this Eastern intonation. The congregation is a cross section of Houston's Vietnamese population: young, affluent couples with infants, spike-haired teens and elderly, withered women clothed in black pajamas. Many arms are folded across chests – a Vietnamese gesture of respect. There are surprising numbers of young men, reflecting the city's five-to-two ratio of Indochinese men to women.

Father Anthony Dao is a tall, charismatic man of 36 with a quick, boyish grin and broad stride. One of Houston's ten Vietnamese priests, he is known as the "spiritual advisor" of the Vietnamese community, widely respected for his extensive knowledge of both American culture and the Vietnamese experience. Like many of his parishioners, he was a refugee, escaping from Vietnam in 1978. Active in community and university affairs, Father Dao promotes complete assimilation for Houston's Indochinese. Yet he admits that this social integration may take at least a full generation before the Indochinese accept Houston – and Houston accepts them.

Father Dao credits Holy Rosary Church with the surrounding business expansion in downtown Houston. He notes that when Holy Rosary held the city's first Vietnamese Catholic mass in 1975, the parish had a largely social function for the Vietnamese – attracting non-Catholics and Catholics alike in their need for cultural and social contact in a strange new environment. He asserts that over a period of time, Holy Rosary's growing Vietnamese congregation catalyzed the introduction of surrounding businesses, catering to the new community of church-going immigrants.

The relationship between church and commerce seems ironic. Milam Center and Holy Rosary Church – at opposite ends of the Indochinese corridor here – are like metaphors for the divergence of business and spiritual concerns in the Indochinese culture, where commerce is valued least and education most. This hierarchical distinction stems from the role of Buddhist monks as highly respected teachers – virtue equated with wisdom. Later, this regard was transferred to priests and other spiritual leaders.

There is little doubt that Houston's Roman Catholic diocese is a well-organized and influential force within the Indochinese community. Last June, Holy Rosary Church drew nearly 2,000

**Below, from left to right:**

**Advertisements form a collage in the window of Van Hu'u videotapes and books. Van Hu'u attracts many of the Milam Center's younger shoppers, while interior markets draw more traditional customers—like the woman seen leaving Hoa Binh.**

**The Tan-Hung photo studio located inside Milam Center. A yellow-and-red sticker on the door reads "Help Liberate Vietnam."**

**The entrance to Hoa Binh Market in Milam Center. The sign above the door says "welcome customers."**

**A view of Milam Center's interior corridor, from the north entrance: Hoa Binh Market on the right, gift stores, clothing, and fabric shops on the left. A Vietnamese fast-food deli ahead is flanked by more stores.**

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Chào Mừng
QUÍ KHÁCH
15
HOA BINH SUPE
we accept food stamps

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VAN THANH LONG

Southeast Asians to its Marian Year celebration. Processions of women in traditional Indochinese dress were followed by rows of Western-suited elders, stumbling clumps of flower-festooned children in white gowns, Dominican nuns, and church dignitaries.

A rainbow-colored votive statue of the Virgin Mary was held aloft while the silent, somber procession circled the city block, crowding into the parking lot. As high-pitched, Vietnamese music blared through the speakers, people began to sing.

Father Dao calls the Vietnamese mixture of Confucionism, Buddhism, and Taoism as an "art of living," explaining that religious fusions are common, found in the Vietnamese indigenous religions, "Hoa Hao" (translated as "solidarity," or peaceful coexistence), and "Cao Dai" (meaning "high tower" – a combination of all religions). "Asians," he says, smiling, "are very religious. They accept religion – but not always governments."

### Vinatown and Vietnam Plaza

Ten to twelve blocks east of Main Street, surrounded by vacant lots and boarded houses, a large, elegant structure of corrugated metal stands alone. This beautifully simple, rectangular building at 2501 St. Emanuel Street is adorned by a single sign, painted in saffron gold with red letters: "Buddhist Association for the Services of Humanity in America – Chu`a Dai Giác." Like Holy Rosary Church, the temple shares its neighborhood with Indochinese shopping centers and businesses.

Several blocks north of the temple, Vinatown and Vietnam Plaza shopping centers lie in a area long considered Houston's Chinatown. Both are defined and bisected by freeways: Vinatown, south of I-45 and west of US-59; Vietnam Plaza, north of I-45 and east of US-59.

The two-part Vinatown Center on Webster and Jackson streets is made from the same aesthetic dough as the nearby freeways. Design interest is limited to the lively play of Asian letters and words across bland concrete surfaces. Vinatown I includes Anh Hong Restaurant ("7 courses of beef"), Le Croissant D'Or French Bakery, and the enormous An Dong Supermarket, ("agent of Tai Ming Wah Rest Hong Kong White Lotus seed paste mooncake" written over the entrance). Tape and record stores carry both American and Vietnamese popular music; beauty shop posters portray Asian models wearing western hair styles.

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Giao Ngoc Nguyen, 63, is owner and general contractor of the Vinatown Shopping Center. He is a slight, self-effacing man in white shirt, khaki pants, and generic gray spectacles. He smiles continually. Nguyen displays a 20-year-old construction license, newspaper articles, and photographs of massive, concrete housing projects in Saigon: Vinatown's aesthetic antecedents.

However, Nguyen's concerns are not aesthetic, but social. He employed Vietnamese refugees for the construction of Vinatown in 1981, and now, desperately seeking financial backers, he hopes to establish an economic base of Vietnamese self-reliance. He will begin with an Indochinese credit union. He also dreams of constructing nearby housing projects for elderly Indochinese – increasingly a problem in the community. Life in Houston, as elsewhere in America, has wrought drastic changes upon Indochinese families. The elderly, traditionally revered in Vietnamese culture, are isolated by new lifestyles and language barriers. Entire families work, leaving older parents and grandparents alone. Television offers no solace and the elderly are considered too old to learn English. Vinatown II houses the city's only Vietnamese Senior Citizen Association, to which elderly travel great distances for meals, conversation, and companionship. Unable to attain a tax-exemption, the association is virtually helpless to provide more.

Surrounded by freeways and empty warehouses, five-year-old Vietnam Plaza occupies the former home of Finger Furniture. It is, according to a former manager, one of the only exclusively Vietnamese centers in the city. Across the street, an L-shaped, single-story, cement shopping strip is embellished with Chinese-red columns, pseudo-French green awnings, and a Tex-Mex, plastic "tile" roof: an extraordinary polycultural statement.

Nhan Ngoc Luu, serious and intense, sits in an upstairs office of Vietnam Plaza at Jefferson Avenue and Hutchins Street. He speaks passionately of his commitment to freeing Vietnam from communist domination. Luu unlocks a nearby door, revealing another dingy office filled with conference table, stained carpet, artificial cherry-blossoms, and Vietnamese flags: three red bands across a brilliant yellow-gold. Grim black-and-white photographs of jungles and soldiers line the walls and stacks of political literature cover the floor. The room, a quasi-political shrine, houses local meetings of the National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam, a Washington, D.C.-based organization. A banner with "Tin Tuong hoi cac anh" is draped across one wall. Luu points to the photographs of soldiers and translates, "We believe in them."

*Resistance* is the organization's monthly publication – a slick, eight-page newsletter printed entirely in English. On the back page, an explanation: "The National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam (NUFRONLIV) was formed in 1980 by the Vietnamese people inside Vietnam and abroad to liberate their country from the Viet Cong and to build a free and democratic nation . . .To promote our just cause, your financial contributions are welcome."

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**Nam Nguyen: Vietnamese colonel, French lawyer, shrimper, editor, and political organizer. Nguyen is considered by many to be the political voice of Houston's Vietnamese community.**

In August 1985, Nhan Ngoc Luu quietly left Houston to return to Vietnam after more than 10 years. Knowing the dangers of the trip, he did not tell even his wife of the journey. As a Vietnamese refugee, he understood the risk of imprisonment or death.

Luu walked through steamy, wet jungle for six days, traveling to a freedom-fighters' campsite. As a supporter of the National United Front organization, he wanted to see the resistance effort himself. After two weeks in Vietnam, he returned – more determined than ever, he says, to see his country free.

### The Political Community

Nam Nguyen sits behind a dusty glass store front facing Fannin Street, three blocks east of Holy Rosary Church. It seems unlikely the store has been touched for 25 years. Nguyen, 54, is surrounded by tall, thick stacks of Vietnamese newspapers, a few chairs, and litter everywhere. The small, two-room office is hot and humid. Nguyen, a large, thick man dressed in brown slacks, white starched shirt and a tie, twitches uncomfortably.

Nguyen stares directly at his visitor – a strangely un-Vietnamese act. He explains that this office, which he personally finances, is a distribution center for the journalistic literature surrounding us. As if to illustrate his point, Indochinese men come and go, exchanging stacks of newspapers.

Nguyen, considered a political spokesman for Houston's Vietnamese community, is articulate and emphatic about his country's current political state. Concerned with the same adjustments as other Houston refugees, he also is obsessed with his vision of a free Vietnam – and his dream of someday returning. He hopes only to live long enough to help with the country's reconstruction efforts. Nguyen believes the issue of Vietnam's struggle is very much alive for the vast majority of Houston's Indochinese population. Many still hope to return "home."

Nguyen, a retired colonel in the Vietnamese army, was responsible for 50,000 communist prisoners-of-war during the Vietnamese war. He took part in the 1970-1973 Paris peace negotiations and helped formulate post-war prisoner agreements. Nguyen holds a French law degree; publishes and distributes a newspaper, Thô´ng Nhâ´t (translated as "Unity"); and is a former chairman of the Vietnamese Community Organization of Houston. As a shrimp fisherman in Seabrook between 1979 and 1981, Nguyen was involved in the famous battle with the Ku Klux Klan. After a long siege of harassment, that battle ended when the Vietnamese obtained a federal court injunction against the KKK in May 1981.

Nguyen's conversation is riddled with anti-communist commentary. He explains that his country's economy has regressed some 30 years under the communists, adding "our families [are] still there – our friends [are] still there – in concentration camps." His voice crescendos: '*That* is why we fight to liberate my country."

When pressed for information about the estimated eight to ten Indochinese political groups in Houston, Mr. Nguyen gently explains that these are not actually "political," but *community* groups. He quietly adds that American laws prohibit certain political organizations. A small rodent runs across the room behind, as though signaling the interview's conclusion. Nguyen lumbers to his feet, and talks of his three children, ages 22, 10, and 6: "We ask them to learn two things. First, he has to believe in the United States, respect the law and be fair; but also, he must know their father and mother and homeland is Vietnam. He must know that he has two countries – he cannot say 'I do not recognize Vietnam.' He is a citizen of *two* countries."

A sense of transience prevails throughout Houston's Indochinese community: urgency permeating conversation; businesses occupying buildings uneasily, like tight-fitting clothes; individuals waiting silently, and working ferociously. Lan Thi Pham explains, "We do not know for how long we have *anything*."

In the interim, Houston is awakened, enlivened – and enriched. ■