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Little Saigon and Vietnamese American Communities

Vietnamese American communities and their commercial and cultural enclaves have developed all over the United States since the early 1980s. Vietnamese Americans are now the fourth-largest Asian American group in the country (after immigrants from China, India, and the Philippines in order of size). According to the 2007 Survey of Business Owners report, the percentage of Vietnamese Americans who own businesses has

increased by 56 percent since 2002, compared to the 40 percent increase of other Asian groups.

The oldest and largest of these enclaves is Little Saigon in suburban Orange County, California. Situated in a historically white community lined with orange groves in Southern California, Little Saigon has helped bolster the region's economy with tourism and business. According to 2010 Census figures, the Vietnamese American population in Southern California is 271,000, by far the largest concentration outside of Vietnam. Little Saigon sprawls out from the city of Westminster to adjacent cities of Fountain Valley, Garden Grove, and Santa Ana.

Orange County's Little Saigon is situated about 60 miles north of Camp Pendleton, the Marine Corps base, the first of four emergency processing centers set up to receive the "first wave" of evacuees from South Vietnam in April 1975. About 50,000 Vietnamese were processed through the makeshift "tent cities" of Camp Pendleton in 1975. From the initial entry at Camp Pendleton, many Vietnamese resettled in the Orange County to work in the nearby defense and high-tech industries and in small entrepreneurial enterprises. Timothy Linh Bui's 2001 film, *Green Dragon*, focuses on the experiences of Vietnamese Americans and American marines in Camp Pendleton during this transitional period. Southern California's warm climate and then-affordable housing and real estate provided additional incentives for secondary migrations into the region. Thus, charitable organizations, namely Saint Anselm's, led the effort in meeting the needs of the Southeast Asian communities newly arrived in the region.

Today, Little Saigon offers what sociologists have termed "institutional completeness" for Vietnamese Americans, meaning the enclave can meet all the economic, social, linguistic, and cultural needs of the community within its geographical boundaries.

Historical Development

The development of a Vietnamese American business district in Orange County has been credited to ethnic Chinese immigrants from Vietnam, Danh Quach and Frank Jao, who built the Asian Garden Mall in the heart of Little Saigon. Quach and Jao's ethnic Chinese

background has been cause for controversy within the Vietnamese American community because of centuries-old antagonism between the Vietnamese and the Chinese. They were the pioneers who first established businesses in the area in 1978. Jao's early ventures in real estate development have contributed to putting this enclave on the map as a formally recognized Little Saigon replete with its own signposts from the freeways and a monument dedicated to South Vietnamese and American allies at the Sid Goldstein Freedom Park nearby.

On the surface, Little Saigon appears to be a thriving ethnic enclave unified by language and culture with the myriad ethnic Vietnamese- and Chinese-owned businesses patronized by a large clientele from surrounding cities. From an outsider's vantage point, this recent immigrant group seems to be cohesive and economically successful, living out the American Dream and taking their place among the "model minority." Looking closely, it becomes apparent that the model minority stereotype does not account for the enormous diversity of experience among the Vietnamese American community represented by Little Saigon.

Historically, factors that have united this community despite their heterogeneity in class and education include the common bond of anti-Communist sentiments. An important aspect of Little Saigon, and a reason for its conservatism and pervasive anti-Communist politics, is that it is home to many officers of the former South Vietnamese regime as well as those more recent immigrants sponsored via the Orderly Departure Program (1979–1994), former political prisoners who served a minimum of three years in Communist reeducation camps.

Because the memories of war atrocities committed by the Viet Cong (on both the battlefield and in reeducation camps) remain alive in the consciousness of this community, they inevitably influence the community's politics and its attitude toward mainstream America and Vietnam. A majority of the Vietnamese American community has favored the Republican Party, evidenced by the tradition of support for GOP candidates. A notable event in the 2000 presidential campaign indicating this loyalty to the GOP was when presidential candidate John McCain used the term

“gook” unapologetically in referencing his Viet Cong captors and was still endorsed by Vietnamese American community leaders. Despite the racism that is apparent by the use of such a slur, a large faction of the community overlooked McCain’s speech and gave him a “hero’s welcome” to Orange County’s Little Saigon on March 1, 2000.

Little Saigon has been featured in numerous films, documentaries, books, and even a cookbook. One noteworthy representation of Little Saigon and Vietnamese American Communities is the Smithsonian’s traveling exhibition (2007–2010) “Exit Saigon, Enter Little Saigon,” which featured stories of Vietnamese Americans since 1975 through photo and text panels as well as accompanying educational materials.

Cultural and Social Hub

Every lunar New Year, or *Tet*, Vietnamese Americans come to Orange County’s Little Saigon from all over the country, and even as far as Australia and France, to celebrate the most important holiday for the community. The Tet Festival has been organized by Vietnamese Americans since the very beginning of the community’s formation, albeit very modestly among church groups in the late 1970s. In 1982, the Union of Vietnamese Student Associations (UVSA) consolidated the Tet Festival into a large event that now attracts over 100,000 people every year.

Besides Tet, Little Saigon serves the important function of being the cultural and social hub for Vietnamese Americans and, arguably, all overseas Vietnamese. One way this community stays such a focal point is through its extensive media networks, which includes the largest Vietnamese language daily newspaper in the country, *Nguoi Viet Daily News*. In 1978, Yen Ngoc Do started *Nguoi Viet* from his Garden Grove home. Today, the ethnic press is thriving in Orange County and elsewhere in the United States.

Radio and television are also important sites through which Vietnamese across the United States receive their news and information to maintain an “imagined community” with those spread out all over the country. Popular television channels include Saigon Broadcasting Television Network (SBTN), SaigonTV, and VietFace TV. Radio stations include

Vietnam California Radio (VNCR), Little Saigon Radio, Radio Free Vietnam, and many more. In concert with the news and information industry, Vietnamese Americans are connected via popular entertainment through the music variety show Thuy Nga *Paris by Night* and its competitor Asia Entertainment. These music variety shows, featuring singers of popular Vietnamese music and dancing, are performed live and taped to circulate widely in the United States and abroad. Although they broadcast internationally, they are headquartered in Orange County’s Little Saigon.

Little Saigon meets the needs of Vietnamese Americans through not only providing outlets of entertainment and circuits of news and information, but by the consolidation of food, goods, and services. Restaurants are the most popular attractions for those living in Little Saigon and those who make excursions to the enclave. Grocery stores carrying items not found in mainstream groceries, such as fish sauce, also draw those from surrounding areas to do their shopping in Little Saigon. A variety of service establishments such as beauty salons and foot massage salons have cropped up all over the Orange County area, providing these services for a fraction of mainstream prices.

More recently, language schools and tutoring centers have emerged to meet the demands of a community transitioning into a third generation. Many community organizations geared toward social services that were active in the initial stages of community development have now given way to social and cultural organizations aimed at preserving Vietnamese heritage and disseminating Vietnamese culture. For example, the Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association (VAALA) was founded in 1991 by journalists, artists, and supporters to promote art by and for the community. They organize the biennial Vietnamese International Film Festival, bringing together films and documentary features and shorts about Vietnam and the diaspora since 2003.

Vietnamese American Communities

Vietnamese American communities have formed all over the United States as a cushion against the assimilative forces of mainstream society and as a means for

Vietnamese Americans to be among others sharing similar historical and cultural background and language. The second-largest concentration of Vietnamese Americans outside of Southern California can be found in Northern California, specifically San Jose and its surrounding cities, anchored by Grand Century Mall—the successor to Lion Plaza. Like others, Vietnamese Americans were drawn to the area by the ascension of Silicon Valley from the 1970s, providing ample job opportunities in the high-tech sector and assembly lines.

In 2007, Vietnamese Americans in San Jose lobbied to name the area comprising of over 200 Vietnamese businesses “Little Saigon,” but efforts for formal recognition failed because of internal political divisions within the community. Madison Nguyen, a Vietnamese American councilwoman, was the first to spearhead the effort at naming the business district. However, during the naming controversy, she was dubbed a “Communist” by her opponents and effectively stalled the process. At the writing of this entry, there is an effort by 1.5- and second-generation Vietnamese Americans to name an area of San Diego “Little Saigon” as well. This area in the eastern San Diego neighborhood of City Heights is diverse along lines of race and ethnicity. Most living in the area are newer immigrants.

The third largest concentration of Vietnamese Americans can be found in Houston, Texas, represented by the four-mile stretch of Bellaire Boulevard. In the 2000s, Houston’s Vietnamese American population increase has been attributed to outmigration from California because of high home prices and cost of living. Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast of 2005 also displaced many Vietnamese Americans from Louisiana to seek new livelihoods in Texas.

In New Orleans, Vietnamese Americans are concentrated in an area called Versailles, where they are primarily united through their membership in the Catholic community. Vietnamese were drawn to the area because of active sponsorship by Catholic parishes for refugee resettlement, availability of jobs in the service sector, and the fishing and shrimping industry. When Hurricane Katrina toppled communities in New Orleans East, Vietnamese Americans became

much more politicized and actively reconstructed their communities through church- and youth-led efforts. In the wake of Katrina, Vietnamese American community organizations have emerged stronger, such as Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association of New Orleans (VAYLA-NO). The community has been cast by the media as triply-displaced, yet fiercely resilient. In a documentary titled *A Village Called Versailles*, S. Leo Chiang shows the strategies Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans deployed in fighting for their homes and their community.

On the East Coast, Vietnamese Americans have come together in areas such as Boston’s Fields Corner and Falls Church, Virginia’s Eden Center. Boston’s urban density framed the construction of a Vietnamese American neighborhood that serves as a “panethnic” and immigrant-focused social services center. Sociologist Karin Aguilar-San Juan’s 2009 book, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*, explores the parallels and differences between Orange County’s Little Saigon and Boston’s Fields Corner as a comparative case study in place-making and community building. Aguilar-San Juan argues that Vietnamese American place-making must be contextualized as part of a broader framework of ethnic enclaves and processes through which groups seek critical mass and political representation.

In a smaller suburban community in Springfield, Massachusetts, Vietnamese Americans were honored during Asian Pacific American Heritage Month (April 2010) when the city council raised the South Vietnam, or “Freedom and Heritage” flag at City Hall. Finally, when Vietnamese Americans do not lay geographical claim to a particular neighborhood or section of a city, they often integrate into other established, or pan-Asian, business districts. This is certainly the case for Honolulu’s Chinatown, which houses many Vietnamese-owned businesses and caters toward this population as well. Los Angeles Chinatown has seen a transition toward a predominant Chinese-Vietnamese population since the 1980s and the physical evidence can be found in multilingual business signs and languages spoken among residents and patrons there.

Thuy Vo Dang

See also Chinatown, New York; Koreatown; Little India and South Asian Communities; Luce-Celler Act of 1946; Tết; Vietnamese Americans

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