

THE ETHNIC EXPLOSION: ORANGE COUNTY'S SILENT PHENOMENON

BY VALERIE SMITH

Moua Chou, a soft-spoken man in his mid-thirties, is a member of the Hmong, a preliterate tribe of migratory farmers from the mountains of northern Laos. During the Vietnam War, the Hmong were recruited by the CIA to fight a "secret" war against the Pathet Lao and the Viet Cong. With the collapse of South Vietnam, and the subsequent fall of Cambodia and Laos in 1975, Moua Chou and his family were among tens of thousands of refugees who escaped across the border to relocation camps in Thailand.

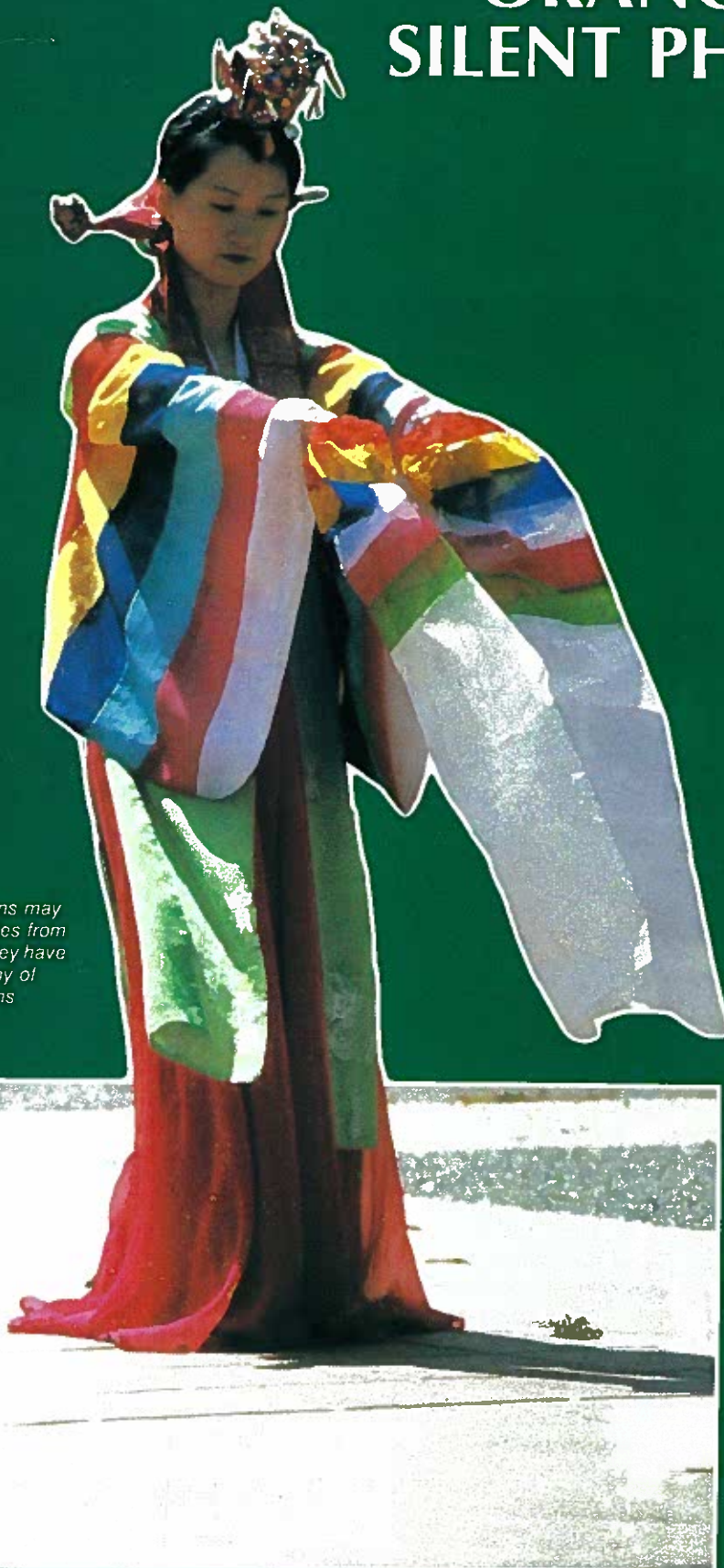
The 1973 overthrow of the Salvador Allende government in Chile sparked a similar exodus. For Juani, a high-school teacher, the effects were devastating. Overnight she found herself without employment, and her husband, a member of the opposition party, imprisoned by the new regime. For two years, she followed him as he was transferred from prison to prison. Eventually, with help from human-rights organizations outside Chile, she was able to secure permission for them to leave the country.

In the early 1950s, there was no indication that a sleepy agricultural community of 200,000 people would develop into a major metropolitan region. But in just a few decades, it has done just that. Situated midway between Los Angeles and San Diego, Orange County in the '60s and '70s became the ideal haven for city-dwellers escaping the pollution, crime and congestion of an urban environment. With a real estate boom, and the subsequent attraction of new industry and commercial interests to the area, it offered a peaceful setting, clean air, a temperate climate, job opportunities and plenty of affordable housing.

Today, more than 2,000,000 people reside within the county's boundaries. Wide-open vistas dominated by citrus groves and farmland have since given way to housing developments, shopping centers, freeways, office complexes and factories. But there has also been a less-obvious transformation over the past 20 years. According to 1980 Census figures, one out of every five people in Orange County is a member of a minority group.

Though always predominantly white, Orange County has long supported small resident populations of blacks and American Indians, as well as foreign- and American-born Japanese, Koreans, Chinese, Filipinos and Hispanics. As the overall

Local Koreans may be 8,000 miles from home, but they have brought many of their traditions with them.



Nelson Ferguson

County, once an isolated, homogenized community, now wears a different face and a different future.



Michael B. Dixon

population grew, these groups experienced a proportionate increase. But political and economic upheaval overseas fueled dramatic changes in the county's demographics. In 1975, Camp Pendleton, close to the south county line, became the initial entry point for thousands of Indochinese refugees. And still further south, the flow of both legal and illegal Mexican nationals across the border steadily accelerated, bolstered by many Central and South Americans fleeing turmoil in their homelands.

Today, Hispanics and Asians constitute the greater part of Orange County's minority population. Of the roughly 400,000 individuals considered to be of minority status, Spanish-speaking residents account for some 286,000, a 78 percent increase over 1970 Census figures. The Indochinese population has surpassed that of the Japanese both in size and growth, to become the largest Asian group. According to recent private and federal survey information, an estimated 60,000 to 70,000 persons from Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia

reside here, the largest per capita concentration of Indochinese in the country.

To outsiders, there may be some irony in the fact that Orange County has succumbed to the winds of change — particularly the *kind* of change least compatible with its image as a bastion of conservatism. While such a dramatic shift in social profile might seem to guarantee staunch opposition, community reaction has been surprisingly mild. After all, the county is still very young. Seventy percent of its residents and 90 percent of its work force were born elsewhere. Then there is the oddly dissociated nature of the place. The more tangible signs of social diversity sometimes seem to get lost in the maze of freeways and suburban expanse. Cultural encounters more often than not are brief and incidental. In the planned developments and affluent residential sections especially, one's awareness of a growing ethnic and racial constituency is as likely to come from the six o'clock news as from anywhere else.

In fact, the media proved a useful ally

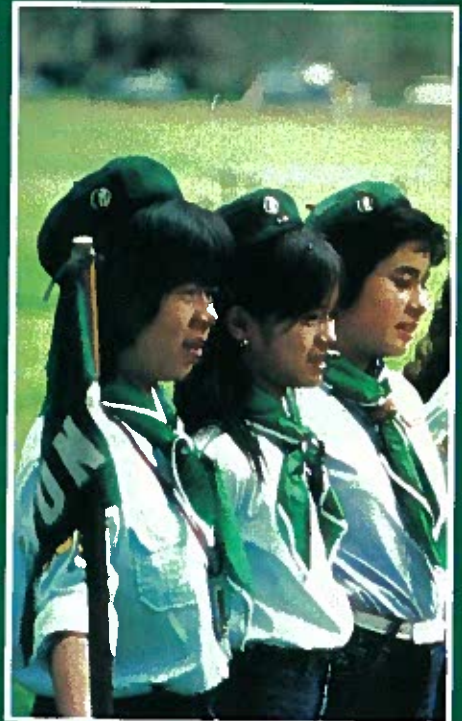
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Hispanics are introduced early to their culture.



Introduced in the L.A. area, Japanese-Americans play their traditional "koto" in Orange County, as well.

Nelson Ferguson



Jim Young

Vietnam is but a hazy and distant nightmare to these Girl Scouts.

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se Indochinese arriving in the n 1975, coming into a virtual vac- without benefit of an established nclave to receive them. Several g factors worked in their favor. s the generally accepted idea that ibility for their plight might be o U. S. failure in foreign policy in 1 – a perception shared by both the political spectrum. While con- es saw the refugees as victims of mist aggression, liberals consid- eir resettlement an ethical and arian obligation. These views, r reinforced by the press, helped to e an atmosphere of support for gees.

er factor buffered their reception. es in the first wave tended to be ionals, skilled and usually well ed. Many already possessed

unrealistic. Beginning in 1979 and continuing through 1982, there was a second influx into the county. These were the much-publicized "boat people" and the overland refugees from Laos and Cambodia who had saturated relocation camps in Thailand and Malaysia. Three and one-half times the number of original refugees arrived in the United States during this period. Those in this second wave were primarily rural-dwellers. On the average, they came from poorer backgrounds, had less education, fewer vocational skills and, in many cases, virtually no exposure to Western culture. Many were also in extremely poor health due to hazardous journeys and inadequate facilities in the relocation camps.

Private and governmental agencies, in preparation for the initial influx, developed an effective network of support programs. But sheer weight of numbers and the fact that these newer refugees required a longer transition period placed a severe

ment costs had been federally subsidized. But as the nation moved deeper into recession, significant cuts were made. Just as recessionary effects were hitting the county, the brunt of financial responsibility for refugee resettlement was shifted to local government. It was about this time that a perceptible swing occurred in the mainstream attitude toward the Indochinese.

By 1981, antirefugee sentiment had reached a high level. The Orange County Human Relations Commission, an agency established by the Board of Supervisors to deal with interracial tension, felt it necessary to issue a report denying the many myths that had taken hold in the community. Most of these myths seemed to center around the belief that the Indochinese had access to an inordinate amount of government assistance. There were rumors of preferential low-interest home and business loans, exorbitant welfare benefits, and even a \$5,000 stipend for each refugee on his arrival in this country.

All of these were false, but they pointed to an interesting duality in the public mind. A private survey conducted by the Immigrant and Refugee Planning Center, an organization formed to study the impact of Indochinese resettlement in the county, revealed a high percentage of residents felt that the Indochinese were highly motivated, conscientious and diligent workers. Yet the same majority felt they represented a financial liability to the area.

The latter is still a sensitive issue for many in the Indochinese community.

"Many Americans believe our people are not working, that they're taking the tax dollars," says Moua Chou, the Lao-Hmong refugee who is now both a social worker for the county and a practicing pastor. "Also, a number of Vietnamese have been very successful in business. Maybe you have been born here and you were not able to make a success of your business. Then I come in and I do it. If I was on welfare, how was I able to succeed so fast? It's either I'm lying or I'm a crook. Those are the only two understandable assertions."

But, he continues, the real truth underlying such success is a cultural allegiance to family kinship. This network of family ties has allowed not only Vietnamese but Korean, Laotian and Chinese entrepreneurs to parlay minimal resources into thriving business concerns. "It's a community project. I borrow \$100 here, \$200 there, and so forth. I don't have to pay interest. Once my business is established, I can pay everyone back. When you have 4,000 families each giving \$100, you have \$400,000. But the American people don't understand how you can get that much money. They believe you have to do it on your own." *Continued*



es of Orange County today are a *mélange* of different races and nationalities.

egree of English proficiency from worked with U. S. armed forces or ss concerns abroad. According to egee, a county refugee coordinator me, their arrival also happily coin- with the need by the burgeoning acturing industry for entry-level s.

first refugees who went to work accepted jobs much below their s," Magee says. "So they made a impression on employers. Be- we had overqualified people going v-wage jobs, there was a sort of moon' period of very high expecta-

for others who followed in their such expectations proved highly

strain on such programs. Added to this were the unforeseen effects of secondary migration. From the outset, the federal government attempted an even dispersment of refugees across the country. This plan, intended to lower the impact of resettlement on the local level, did not take into account a strong cultural dedication to family on the part of the Indochinese. There were many who wanted badly to be reunited with relatives and friends. Coupled with the attraction of temperate climate, low-cost education, well-organized social services and great job prospects, this resulted in a mass relocation of Indochinese to the area from all over the U. S.

In the beginning, most of the resettle-

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But the economic shift which converted a labor shortage into a labor surplus has meant severe layoffs for Indochinese, who usually have less job seniority than other workers. Federal and state cut-backs in ESL (English As a Second Language) and vocational programs have posed setbacks for those trying to learn the language and develop marketable skills. Even with skills, many will have a hard time finding employment. A growing number of companies, faced with higher facility and production costs, reduced demand, and a lack of skilled professional and technical labor, have moved out of the area altogether. Fewer companies have been hiring, and those that have are requiring a greater degree of English-speaking ability. Many firms dependent on a large minority work force have discontinued on-site English classes. Some, like ITT Cannon in Santa Ana, have resorted to a strictly job-related approach.

"ITT has recognized the impossibility of doing anything beyond vocational English programs," says Jim Meuse, Director of ITT Cannon's Cooperation and Benefit Programs. "ESL, as it is regularly taught, takes too long." But despite the problems facing local industry, he says, development of available manpower via training programs is still the key to economic survival.

Problems of unemployment, affordable housing and quality education are concerns shared by most Orange County minorities. Yet the county's Hispanic population, because of its sheer size and historic roots in the area, would seem logically to have made the greatest inroads into existing power structures. But political and economic influence have been slow in coming. The tremendous complexity within that community may be one reason. The term "Hispanic" encompasses a vast continuum of national and racial identity, and includes subtle gradations of political, social and economic affiliation. Twenty percent of the Spanish-speaking populace come from Cuba, Puerto Rico and the countries of Central and South America, while the majority are from Mexico or are of Mexican extraction.

"When you talk about the Hispanic community," says Jess Araujo, a successful Orange County attorney and an active member of the Orange County Mexican-American Bar Association and the Latino Chamber of Commerce, "basically you're talking about two different groups. The second-generation Latinos and third- and fourth-generation Mexican-Americans fall roughly into one group, first-generation Mexicanos and the more recent arrivals from Mexico into the other."

According to Araujo, priorities for each

group differ greatly — a factor which tends to place them at a social and economic distance from one another. "For long-time Mexican-American residents, building and maintaining a strong commercial foundation is very important," he says. "They are concerned with business, and take an active interest in matters that affect the economic development of their community." On the other hand, he says, the Mexicanos are generally much poorer and come with an entirely different orientation — the business of survival . . . finding shelter, food and a job.

Despite dramatic differences in priorities and often sharp divisions in socio-economic status, another barrier separates the two — a great majority of new arrivals are here illegally. There are no clear-cut statistics for the undocumented population in the county — figures range from 50,000 to 100,000 and upward — but their presence in considerable numbers has placed many conservatives, particularly Hispanic conservatives, in an uncomfortably ambiguous position.

Hector Godinez, a prominent businessman and national past-president of LULAC, League of United Latin American Citizens, is one example. "These people are hard workers," he says. "They want to work. If every illegal in this county were to disappear tomorrow, 90 percent of the restaurants here would cease to operate, and a couple of thousand homes in Lido Isle (Newport Beach) would be without maids. Most of the work Anglos don't want to do would be left undone."

Godinez, however, is concerned that the existence of such a population, economically disadvantaged and without rights, might well be undermining the efforts of the Hispanic middle class to develop economic and political clout. "I don't think the Hispanic community here can survive in a vital way without the direct participation of the Anglo. They have the power, the political, educational, economic means. We've got to compete on that level and take our place in politics, education and economics. And this is slowly beginning to happen. But then there is this never-ending infusion of new arrivals. Anglos don't always recognize the difference. They see a brown face, period."

Divided sympathies and ambivalent attitudes toward the undocumented seem to spill over into the larger community as well. "To most elected officials," says Amin David, Chairman of the Immigration Special Committee for the state division of LULAC, "the issue of immigration and the undocumented is a 'hot potato.' They seem more concerned with zoning issues than immigration legislation. The impact of the Simpson-Mazzoli bill is not an important matter on their agenda."

Amnesty, a hotly debated provision of

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the recent Simpson-Mazzoli legislation, is one issue that exemplifies the far-reaching implications which national policy has for local communities. A major argument in favor of providing legitimate status for undocumented residents is the wholesale exploitation taking place *after* they cross the border. And such exploitation is directly linked to the county's housing problems.

Lower-income white, Asian and Hispanic families traditionally gravitated to the inland areas of Santa Ana, Garden Grove, Stanton, Fullerton and Westminster, where low-cost housing was more prevalent than in the expensive beach areas. The same economic slowdown that affected employment also contributed to the current "housing crunch," by rocketing interest rates and causing a sharp dropoff in the construction of new homes. As housing prices continued to climb, more and more rental units were converted to condominiums. The amount of low-cost housing dwindled. This situation resulted in a number of short-term solutions - increased density of housing units and increased number of occupants per unit.

These solutions proved equitable to all parties - at least for a while. Higher densities guaranteed a low-cost work force for industry. Despite crowded living conditions, minorities were able to maintain their extended family structure while distributing costs among many family members. For the owners, the demand for such housing by both Asians and Hispanics greatly added to the rental potential of their properties.

But such short-term solutions have produced some rank side-effects. The discretely acknowledged fact that many tenants were undocumented, and therefore unlikely to complain, became a license for many landlords to jack rents to exorbitant levels. Without maintenance, overused facilities rapidly deteriorated. Entire residential sections in Santa Ana, Garden Grove and other areas soon descended to slum-level conditions.

According to Bob Nava of the Human Relations Commission, it is not unusual to find owners renting out their garages. "We've seen cases where they'll charge \$175 a head and pack in ten or 15 people."

Short-range planning not only became alarmingly visible but increasingly felt in city budgets. Business and higher-income families began leaving for outlying

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areas, causing a reduction in revenue for local governments. Meanwhile, greater density began to take its toll in increased public expenditures for maintenance of sewers and streets.

Currently there are major redevelopment projects underway in Santa Ana, Fullerton, Garden Grove and several other inland cities. But many see this as a bid to attract higher-income families back rather than improving conditions for the existing low-income residents.

"In the last couple of years," Nava says, "the trend has been for upper- and middle-class families to move closer to work and, thus, closer to the urban centers. Redevelopment efforts are geared toward this trend. But this also means displacement for many minorities. If older homes and rental units are eliminated, where do they go? With the current price of housing in the county, how can they afford to live here?"

The interrelationship of national issues with community concerns is one fraught with complexity. Dave Pierce, a State Department representative on loan to the county to study the problems of refugee resettlement from a local perspective, contends that even a single aspect of immigration reform, like amnesty, can result in difficult situations for local governments. "When undocumented aliens become legal residents, their families are likely to come here. There could be direct confrontations (between minority groups) over housing as a result. We need to start talking about this transition situation of limited lower-cost housing now, to see what we can do to head off problems in the future."

Others involved with the community concerns of housing, employment and education echo Pierce's view that long-range planning is needed if future problems are to be avoided. Given that the current trend toward social diversity is expected to continue well into the next decade, planning which considers the needs of a growing ethnic and racial constituency seems essential.

Orange County still holds the promise of those things most symbolic of the American Dream . . . a safe place to live, work, raise a family, and the chance to pursue one's ambitions with a good hope of realizing them. For minorities, especially new arrivals, it is a powerful lure.

"You have to take risks if you want to live better," says Manuel, the undocumented worker. "If they send me back to Mexico, I would try very hard to get back here." **A**



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Do illegal aliens pay their fair share?

Orange County records say yes, but some officials fear the price tag of a federal immigration-reform bill

By Randall Hackley
The Register

SANTA ANA — Porfirio Perez figures he has paid \$40,000 in taxes after working in the fields of Orange County for 19 years.

Perez is one of 80,000 to 120,000 illegal aliens in the county who pay taxes, send their children to public schools and sometimes collect welfare illegally.

Some say illegal aliens sap taxpayers' pocketbooks and job prospects, taking more in social services than they pay in taxes. Others say the scales tip the opposite way. In Orange County, the figures support the latter view.

According to county tax, sales, health and education estimates, it cost the county at least \$13 million to care for illegal aliens and their families last year. Meanwhile, illegal aliens living in Orange County paid about \$102 million in taxes to the local economy.

The Simpson-Mazzoli Immigration Reform and Control Bill, which passed the Senate last year and awaits House action this session, would radically alter those scales.

The bill, which attempts to cut the flow of illegals into the country, would make employers liable to fines and imprisonment if they hire undocumented workers. The measure also would offer limited amnesty to aliens who have resided in the United States since 1982, which some say could cause an increase in newly legalized aliens applying for welfare.

Illegal aliens currently are forbidden to use local services "except to drive our roads, drink water from our system," send their children to schools and use hospitals and health clinics for emergency care, said Rusty Kennedy, executive director of the Orange County Human Relations Commission.

Allegations that undocumented workers cost the public more than they add to the local economy are "hogwash," Kennedy said. The cost-benefit ratio in

taxes paid and services rendered proves undocumented aliens' local worth, he said.

But David North, director of the Center for Labor and Migration Studies in Washington, D.C., predicted in a June report to the Orange County Board of Supervisors that if the Simpson-Mazzoli immigration bill passes, welfare applications from illegal aliens "will increase sharply when some of this currently excluded community begin to receive benefits."

Within three years, the bill would cost county taxpayers \$8.5 million, North said, compared to \$1.1 million in current annual relief assistance for illegal aliens.

But the Orange County Human Services Agency, which expects 6,000 undocumented workers to apply for welfare if the bill passes, estimates local costs to provide aid for newly legalized aliens will remain at \$1.1 million a year.

The Board of Supervisors' study on the expected effect of the Simpson-Mazzoli bill noted "a very low rate of social services utilization by undocumented immigrants. The percentage of those who secured welfare payments ranged from less than 1 percent to 4 percent."

Every major study on the undocumented worker "that employed scientific methodology (has) reached the conclusion that the undocumented worker was not a drain on the economy," said historian Rodolfo Acuna, professor of Chicano studies at Cal State Northridge.

While the county has not taken an official stance on the bill, immigration legislation that opens relief programs to newly legalized aliens could have "far-reaching consequences on the county of Orange," Supervisor Bruce Nestande said.

Under proposed legislation, newly legalized aliens with a family of four could qualify for up to \$833 a month in county cash programs, said Sylvia Wall, manager for food-stamp and general-relief programs.

At present, undocumented residents in Orange County are ineligible for non-emergency health care, legal aid, welfare, food stamps, unemployment benefits or Social Security, Kennedy said.

Under current House versions of the bill, the federal government would not reimburse the county for welfare costs. "That's what worries us," said Beverly