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Dreams of Escape and Belonging

The Making of Asian El Monte since 1965

ALEX SAYF CUMMINGS

> The only thing we had in common was, what? McDonald's? I remember somebody calling me "Chinese sushi," and I had no idea what sushi was.
> —Christine Tran, 2018

On a dark early morning in 1992, 4:00 A.M., Win Chuai Ngan made the choice. It was the decision that would carry him far from the way station where he had languished on the long journey from poverty to freedom: a stop called slavery. Once everyone else was asleep, Chuai Ngan scaled the wall around the apartment complex on Santa Anita Avenue and ran madly into the night, with the phone number of a Thai temple crumpled in his pocket. He had scavenged it from a newspaper in the garbage when his masters let him take out the trash one evening.[1]

Chuai Ngan was one of dozens of Thai laborers who were forced to work from early in the morning until late in the night, sewing garments in an unassuming apartment complex in El Monte. Labor contractors had lured the

victims from Thailand, promising them a voyage to the United States and a job in sewing, with reasonable hours and an opportunity to romp through the joys of American freedom in Los Angeles.

What they found instead was chilling. "Maliwan Clinton recalls her first taste of America with a shudder," the journalist Teresa Watanabe wrote in 2008. "In this fabled land of the free, she was enslaved behind razor wire and around-the-clock guards in an El Monte sweatshop, where she and more than 70 other Thai laborers were forced to work 18-hour days for what amounted to less than a dollar an hour."[2]

It was a classic grift, with a brutal authoritarian streak. The ringleaders told the captives that they would have to work—for less than minimum wage—to pay off the cost of their travel to the United States, making them indentured servants at best. They had to buy their food and other basic necessities from a commissary run out of a garage by their masters, a kind of company store. They were told that their families would be punished if they rebelled, and American police would shave their heads and brand their scalps if they managed to escape.[3]

There were no armed guards at the complex when Chuai Ngan made his daring escape, but afterward, the bosses were more careful. Three years later, in 1995, a group of government officials and community activists gathered late in the night at a nearby Yum Yum Donuts to work out their plan.[4] They had been working for years to build enough evidence to raid the El Monte compound, and now a team of representatives from the California Department of Industrial Relations, the Thai Community Development Center, and other groups was set to storm the complex.

When they arrived, the officials made sure to block the exit to the compound, forced their way in through the gates, and broke down doors to apartments that were locked from the outside, in some cases using a hammer. Unit by unit, they freed terrified and alarmed workers and eventually found and arrested the seven ringleaders who were holed up in the last apartment.[5] The whole operation was reminiscent of Allied armies rolling into Germany or Poland during World War II. "They had it so highly organized—systemized," Chancee Martorell of the Thai Community Development Center said. "It was like a Nazi concentration camp. I couldn't believe this could be happening in our country, in our own backyard."[6]

The workers were eventually freed to enjoy the vagaries of American life—though they had to endure an arduous stint in the hands of the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), treated like criminals in orange jumpsuits, before being released.[7] Chuai Ngan became a successful restauranteur, most notably of the Win's Thai Cuisine spot in Van Nuys—which he owned with Sokanya Sutthiprapha, another detainee of the El Monte sweatshop.[8]

This bizarre and horrific episode tells many stories. Most notably, it was perhaps the single most widely known instance of systematic forced labor in the United States since the Civil War. It pierced, albeit briefly, the consciousness of an America that believed something like that could not possibly happen here (despite the fact that, of course, "it" had happened in America for several hundred years). It speaks of the enormous hardships and vulnerability that Asian migrants to the United States have faced, even after the Immigration Act of 1965 lifted racist quotas and liberalized immigration.[9] That ticket to America and that tourist visa were worth gambling everything for many people coming from Vietnam, Thailand, China, and other places in Asia and the Pacific.

Those fleeing war, poverty, and persecution in their home countries might have arrived somewhere else at first—in New York, Florida, Louisiana, or Georgia—but many ended up in El Monte.

Of course, not everyone was a slave in a sweatshop. But low-wage work in manufacturing was one of many factors that brought migrants to El Monte, in addition to the political upheaval that drove so many Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Chinese to Southern California. Christine Tran, an educator and sociologist from South El Monte, remembers her mother's journey through the wearisome and capricious world of piecework. "My mom worked in sweatshops, and I was around sweatshops my whole childhood," Tran recalled in 2018. "A lot of people want to live and be near the factory work." She continued: "Very strange market things influenced garment factories. At a time, it was a very popular thing for women, the one-button cardigan. It took a toll on a lot of the button workers. Imagine putting in eight buttons, and getting paid for eight buttons, right? Then all of a sudden the one button cardigan is in—all of a sudden your salary has decreased."[10] In El Monte, the fortunes of whole families could depend on the number of buttons on a sweater.

Roadblocks and Exit Ramps: The Uneven History of Asian Migration to Southern California

What brought so many Asians and Pacific Islanders to El Monte? The San Gabriel Valley (SGV) alone boasts more Asian Americans than any one of forty-two other states in the United States, with a population of over half a million in 2010. "The San Gabriel Valley is home to more Asian-Americans than Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago," the journalist Christopher Yee reported in 2018.[11] If the SGV were a city, it would likely be the most Asian major city in the country, outside of Honolulu. Though other communities in the SGV had majority-Asian populations by this time, El Monte had 26 percent of its population hailing from Asia or the Pacific Islands—a fraction that rivaled the dominant Latino population in the city, and a number that has grown steadily over time.[12]

Conflict and loss has defined the experience of Asians and Asian Americans in El Monte from the beginning. Chinese immigrants had, of course, come to North America—known colloquially as Gum San, or Gold Mountain—during the age of the Gold Rush and railroad construction in the mid-nineteenth century. The profound hostility of native-born workers, especially whites, led to prodigious racial demagoguery by enterprising politicians, resulting most significantly in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882—which choked off almost all immigration from China until the measure was lifted in 1943.[13]

Meanwhile, Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans faced much the same marginalization. Those who managed farms owned by whites faced turmoil when agricultural workers went on strike in the 1930s, setting up a sort of hopeless racial struggle between white, Latino, and Asian players. In the 1940s, when the shade of Japanese internment fell over California, many Japanese residents lost their homes and businesses—"a community erased," as the historian Andre Deckrow puts it.[14] In a land that once belonged to indigenous people, was taken over by Spain and Mexico before the conquest by American Anglos, and then was made more diverse by Asian and Latino migration, the events of the 1940s represented a stunning reversal—the wiping away of the Japanese trace on El Monte's landscape.

The story of Asian El Monte began anew in the 1960s, as immigration reform and new flows of immigrants and refugees changed the face of the city, the SGV, and California as a whole. The Immigration Act passed in the administration of President Lyndon Johnson was a watershed for ethnic diversity in the United States, opening up migration on a more evenhanded basis to people from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The aftermath of the Vietnam War and the genocide in Cambodia brought many newcomers to the region in the 1970s and early 1980s, and like immigrants past, they tapped into existing networks of kin and friends to locate themselves, build communities, and in some cases raise capital to build businesses.[15]

Consider the circuitous path that Van Vo took to America. Following the Communist victory in Vietnam, his family experienced brutal hardship because of his father's connections with the former South Vietnamese regime. At dawn one day when Vo was eighteen, he boarded a shaky raft that was barely able to accommodate him and thirteen other people who were willing to risk everything to escape. He eventually made it to Indianapolis, but before long he joined the Government of Free Vietnam, a group that aimed to overthrow the Communist regime. An ill-fated trip with the organization to Thailand resulted in a ten-year prison sentence in that Southeast Asian kingdom. Finally, in 2011, he returned to the United States to live in El Monte and pursue a career in the law.[16]

Like so many refugees from the conflicts of Southeast Asia, Vo eventually made his way into the middle class in Southern California. However, in many

cases it took longer for refugees to achieve their dream than they might have imagined.

Indeed, the experience of Asian migration to Southern California communities such as El Monte says a great deal about the hopes and perils of the American Dream. It could mean freedom and prosperity, shackles and abuse, or myriad things in between—including a low-paying service job in a nail salon or massage parlor and praying to scratch out enough to send your kids to college.[17]

For many, the dream remained real, even if the results sometimes came up short. In fact, some detainees of the El Monte sweatshop evinced no regrets about their choice to come the United States. "[Maliwan] Clinton and the Chuai Ngans said that whatever travails they endured here, their American journeys have been well worth taking," Watanabe reported. "'American people have such big hearts,' Clinton said, 'and now I'm proud to say I'm one of them'" upon earning her citizenship.[18]

In the twenty-first century, in fact, Asians have outpaced and arguably displaced some Latinos who had long been part of the community.[19] Though El Monte was still remote enough to be relatively immune to the gentrification and skyrocketing cost of living that afflicted most of Los Angeles and its environs, prices have gone up in the early years of this century. Ernie Gutierrez, a resident of El Monte since 1937, was a firsthand witness to its long and gradual transition from segregation to diversity, and he eventually became the city's mayor. "Hispanic people that have immigrated here and haven't been long enough to save up money are probably finding rent here too expensive," Gutierrez remarked in 2008. "They might be moving near relatives in other parts of the state or country where jobs are plentiful and housing is cheaper."[20]

At the same time, though, Asian Americans experience the same cost-of-living pressure as all other residents of El Monte and the SGV. "Nearly 69,000 Asian Americans in the San Gabriel Valley are housing-cost burdened," Asian Americans Advancing Justice reported in 2018, "spending 30% or more of their household income on housing costs."[21] All people—Indian, Thai, Hmong, or Chinese—find themselves in the same boat, even if resources and privileges fall unevenly across racial categories and within the broad Asian American and Pacific Islander category.

In one way, this story is like any other of gentrification unfolding across a vast, metropolitan landscape—the way the churning of wealth and privilege and the lack of it reshapes neighborhoods and cities. But another part is the evolution of a truly multiethnic suburbia in America, whether that is in the SGV or the formerly lily-white subdivisions and shopping malls of Atlanta or Houston. Writing of Latino enclaves, the historian Mike Davis termed this phenomenon "magical urbanism" in 2000. Far away in the American South, the anthropologist Stanley Thangaraj tracked the transformation of suburban

FIG. 15 South El Monte native Christine Tran celebrating Buddha's birthday at a Vietnamese temple in 1987. (Courtesy of Christine Tran.)

Atlanta through the development of basketball leagues among Asian and Arab Americans in the former stomping grounds of the conservative icon Newt Gingrich. Back in the SGV, the historian Wendy Cheng spoke of "the Changs next door to the Diazes" in her own work on the changing face of Southern California neighborhoods and suburbs. Since 1965 and especially

since 1975, El Monte's story has been more and more that of the Lings next to the Gutierrezes next to the Nguyens.[22]

Indeed, conventional narratives of white flight, chocolate cities, and vanilla suburbs no longer work in the age of the suburbanization of poverty and the back-to-the-city movement of affluent young people.[23] Instead of a binary story told about binary people in binary places, one finds a much richer and more complicated braid of stories in places like El Monte.

El Monte and South El Monte may not have been the epicenter of Asian American life in greater Los Angeles, but the Asian presence there has grown more deeply rooted since the 1970s. "Vietnamese people still congregate in Little Saigon in Orange County, and Cambodians still go to the Long Beach area for their community, mainly for celebrations and whatnot, but home is El Monte and South El Monte," Christine Tran recalled. "Some of that could be attributed to the sweatshops that existed, because it was a low-skill job that a lot of Vietnamese and Cambodian people could get."[24]

Living in the 626: "Sometimes I Want to Reconcile with a Past That's Not Really Mine"[25]

After their families came to Southern California, young people of first- or second-generation immigrant status sought to find their way in the region's high schools, community colleges, and universities. Frances Huynh experienced both a sense of difference and one of belonging as part of a Chinese Vietnamese, or Chiuchow, family in El Monte. Born in 1992, she recognized the changing demographic characteristics of her community but still remained nestled within her ethnic or racial group, even if there was no group that exactly mapped onto her own Chinese Vietnamese identity. Huynh's parents were of Chinese descent but grew up in Vietnam: "El Monte is predominantly Latina, but over the years it has becoming (*sic*) more API [Asian Pacific Islander] and more diverse. I feel like that really affected my own identity because even though I surrounded myself with all the Asian kids and my group and this diverse environment, at the same time I didn't know much about other people and other backgrounds, outside of my own. I just stuck into my bubble. And anyone in the 626 [area code], you can ask them—there's this 'Asian bubble' living here."[26] Huynh grew into her identity in college and increasingly identified as API—a racial designation that was more capacious than her ethnic heritage as Chinese Vietnamese. She remains committed to her community in El Monte and sees Vietnam as a second home through the stories her parents have told. She hopes someday to visit, though her brothers appear to be less interested: they see themselves as American through and through and prefer not to dwell on the past.

Asians may have attained greater visibility in the SGV since the 1970s, but at least 15 percent of them in El Monte remain under the poverty line, and the majority there have limited English proficiency.[27] The store signs along Garvey Avenue in El Monte were once all in Spanish, but now many cater to Asian consumers.

Yet El Monte is also a place where an "Asian bubble" can easily exist, and even a former slave like Chuai Ngan could become a prosperous entrepreneur, selling Thai food to Anglo and Asian alike. But different ethnic worlds converged more and more as the twentieth century gave way to the twenty first. By the 2010s, Asians still did not make up the majority of the population of El Monte as they did in SGV towns such as Rosemead or Monterey Park, and Vietnamese residents were a relatively tiny part of that group compared to Chinese Americans—though their presence was growing steadily.

The life of Bang Tran traces this arc: an escape from Vietnam, an uneasy landing in America, and eventual inclusion in a rapidly diversifying El Monte. Piling onto a tiny scooter, Tran, his parents, and four siblings somehow managed to flee their home country in 1975. A brief detention by Communist forces and passage on a ship that broke down in the Pacific followed, but the family made it to Guam, then Hawaii, and then Monterey Park. Tran's parents started selling food out of the back of a Ford Pinto before upgrading to a so-called roach coach—or a "food truck before they got hip," as he puts it. A spot in Los Angeles followed, and then, in 2004, a pho restaurant in El Monte, where Tran grew up eating *albondigas* and speaking Spanish.[28]

Even over a brief period, Tran and his siblings witnessed rapid demographic change at Arroyo High School. "When I grew up here, it was all Hispanic people," he said in 2008. "I only knew about three or four Asian people."[29] Their family was among the few Vietnamese in the community at first, but soon more and more Asian students appeared. "Back then, there were seven Asian students, and three of them were my brothers and sisters," Tran joked.[30]

Today, Garvey Avenue in El Monte and South El Monte is celebrated for its Vietnamese cuisine: Thien Tam vegetarian and the Trans' Viet Huong jostle side by side with King Taco, Krazy Boba bubble tea, and Little Caesars.[31] As the late food critic Jonathan Gold marveled in 2014, "the best pho parlors this side of Little Saigon" could be found on "an unlovely stretch of Garvey Avenue in South El Monte, a town best-known for its unusual concentration of auto-body shops."[32] Garvey Avenue had become yet another raffish corner in the expanding world of Asian life in twenty-first century Southern California.

Like Chuai Ngan—contemplating whether to flee his captivity at possibly the greatest human cost—many people from Thailand, Vietnam, and other neighboring countries had to decide whether to take the chance and leave where they were. Most did not end up in as dire circumstances as Chuai Ngan's, doing forced labor in a sweatshop behind barbed wire. But none knew what really

awaited them. Many were trying to escape violence amid the wars and revolutions of the turbulent 1960s and 1970s in Southeast Asia, hoping to leave refugee camps for the sunny shores of Boca Raton or San Diego. As Viet Thanh Nguyen put it in his award-winning 2015 novel *The Sympathizer*, about Vietnamese desperately floating away from the collapsing regime in the South: "Now that we are to be counted among these boat people, their name disturbs us. It smacks of anthropological condescension, evoking some forgotten branch of the human family, some lost tribe of amphibians emerging from ocean mist, crowned with seaweed. But we are not primitives, and we are not to be pitied."[33] But Nguyen also offered up a stirring call: "We confess to being certain of one and only one thing—we swear to keep, on penalty of death, this one promise: We will live!"[34] And live they did, despite being thrown to the wind by the geopolitics that shattered their homes and by the poverty and the hope that drove untold numbers to leap into unknown futures. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the Asian Americans of El Monte and the SGV have clung to this conviction, in the face of struggles mundane, terrifying, and everything in between.

Notes

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2 Teresa Watanabe, "Home of the Freed," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 2008.
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7 Asian Americans Advancing Justice, "El Monte Garment Workers Case Sets Precedents Beneficial for All Low-Wage Workers," accessed June 28, 2019, https://www.advancingjustice-la.org/blog/el-monte-garment-workers-case-sets-precedents-beneficial-all-low-wage-workers#.W2yghuhKg2J.
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10 Tran, phone interview.
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12 Asian Americans Advancing Justice, "A Community of Contrasts: Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in the San Gabriel Valley," 2018, https://www.advancingjustice-la.org/sites/default/files/A_Community_of_Contrasts_SGV_2018.pdf, 6.
13 Monica Mong Trieu, "Ethnic Chameleons and the Contexts of Identity: A Comparative Look at the Dynamics of Intra-National Ethnic Identity Construction for 1.5 and Second Generation Chinese-Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans," (PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 2008), 99–100. For the historical context of anti-Asian xenophobia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
14 Andre Kobayashi Deckrow, "A Community Erased," chapter 17 in this volume.
15 Robinson-Jacob, "From Virtual Slavery to Being Boss"; Wendy Cheng, *The Changs Next Door to the Diazes: Remapping Race in Suburban California* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 73. For kin networks and entrepreneurship in Asian American communities more broadly, see Huping Ling, *Voices of the Heart: Asian American Women on Immigration, Work, and Family* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2007), xxxv.
16 Courtney Tompkins, "El Monte Man, Long Beach Woman Tell How Many Vietnamese Refugees Escaped," *Pasadena Star News*, May 1, 2015.
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18 Watanabe, "Home of the Freed."
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20 Quoted in Yvonne Villarreal, "Census Snapshot: Asians Find Homes in Historically Latino El Monte," *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 2008.
21 Asian Americans Advancing Justice, "A Community of Contrasts," 3.
22 Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. City* (New York: Verso, 2000); Stanley Thangaraj, *Desi Hoop Dreams: Pickup Basketball and the Making of Asian American Masculinity* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Cheng, *The Changs Next Door to the Diazes*; Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991).
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