FROM ASSIMILATION TO ADVANCEMENT:
Examining the Asian American Impact on Suburbia

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The mythology of the Asian-American journey is one of struggle, determination, and most importantly assimilation. Studying history reveals a traditional narrative of poor immigrants chasing the American Dream and working hard at menial jobs to send money back home to their families. Asian Americans in particular are praised for having adapted to American culture, with their academic and professional accomplishments frequently held up in comparison to other non-white groups. The model minority stereotype is based on the assumption that Asians have assimilated with the greatest success.¹

However, this perception of Asian Americans is problematic for a variety of reasons. Firstly, Asian American is used to refer to a diverse group of people, and there is no consensus on which sub-groups of people fall under the umbrella. For example, Indians and other Southeast Asian nationalities are often not recognized as Asian American.² Secondly, using a blanket term for such a varied population does not account for their individual traditions, languages, or even the history and relations between their respective cultures. Lastly, this view of Asian Americans implies a certain passiveness about the group as a whole. Instead, it is imperative to discuss how Asians and Asian Americans have carved out their own spaces in the United States, and how they have actively changed the existing landscape. Their presence has affected the nature of the American suburb and the development of various suburban communities.

The ethnic diversification of suburbs became more common starting in the 1970s, in correlation with the overall trends of suburbanization and immigration in America.

Between 1970 and 2010, the percentage of Americans living in suburbs across the country grew from 37 to 51, indicating the growth of suburbs. Sixty-two percent of Asian Americans resided in suburbs as of 2010, a substantial increase from 1970, when Asian, Black and Latino Americans collectively comprised just ten percent of the suburban population.\(^3\)

Since then, demographers have developed new methods of tracking the patterns of immigrant settlement in suburbia and finding ways to categorize them. The two most prominent patterns are dispersal and cluttering. Dispersal is when immigrants scatter. According to Zelinsky and Lee, they are able to remain connected with other members of their ethnic community through technology and other means of long distance communication.\(^4\) In contrast, Wei Li coined the term “ethnoburb” to refer to suburban neighborhoods “cluttered” by immigrants.\(^5\) Ethnic stores and other businesses reinforce a strong sense of community and establish a foundation that allows for freedom of cultural expression. Ethnoburbs are an important element of globalization, in that they support “the transnational flows of people, capital, and commodities.”\(^6\) Although the theory of ethnoburbs could be applied to any ethnic group in America, it has most commonly been used to analyze Asian Americans in suburbs.

Monterey Park, California serves as an early example of an Asian-American ethnoburb with clustered settlement. It was the first city in America to have a majority of


\(^6\)Nicolaides, 9.
their population come from Asian descent, as determined by a census in 1990. This has continued to the modern day. The 2010 U.S. Census reported that 66.9% of Monterey Park’s population (60,269) was of Asian descent. It has been dubbed the “First Suburban Chinatown” by Timothy P. Fong, a professor and director of Asian-American Studies at California State University, Sacramento. The political history of Monterey Park serves as an example of some of the early struggles that Asian Americans have faced while settling into suburban neighborhoods.

During its developing years, Asian-American residents of Monterey Park faced social and political opposition to their presence in the form of an English Only campaign and various attempts to legislate the use of Chinese on signage. One of the most notable aspects of what they faced was that the language used against them framed the Asian-American residents as outsiders: foreign to the community. However, this ignores almost a century of history during which Asian immigrants settled the region that Monterey Park was built upon. What the white homeowners who protested against them failed to acknowledge was that the Asian Americans of Monterey Park were not newcomers trying to repaint the neighborhood - many of them had decades of ancestry on that same land before it was rezoned for urban and suburban development.

The History of Asian Settlement in the San Gabriel Valley

The early pioneers who settled the San Gabriel Valley area are often forgotten. Popular history suggests that Fred Hsieh started the first Asian suburb in Monterey Park

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in the 1970s. The Diho Market was supposedly the first modern Chinese supermarket outside of Chinatown. This version of events has overwritten the fact that a century before, the San Gabriel Valley was settled by Chinese, Japanese, Filipino and other South Asian pioneers. These settlers worked in the fields and were responsible for some of the early infrastructure for what would come.\(^\text{10}\)

In 1871, there was a racially-motivated riot in Pasadena dubbed the “Chinese Massacre,” where white workers who were unemployed and angry with the employment situation in the area chased Chinese workers through the city. In total, eighteen Chinese immigrants were killed by the mob.\(^\text{11}\) The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited further immigration from China, meant that such workers were alone in America. They were unable to bring their families to join them, and may not have had the means or will to return on their own. Despite the unfortunate circumstances, they were still earning more money in America than they could in China, and their wages could be sent to relatives back home. Eventually, the pre-existing bachelor society, which was sustained by the continuous immigration of Chinese men, could no longer support the need for workers. Thus cheap Chinese labor in the region was replaced by Japanese Americans by the early 20th century.

Although they dominated the agricultural workforce in the San Gabriel Valley, Japanese migrants were still expected to stay socially segregated. In contrast to the Chinese bachelor society, Japanese Americans brought picture brides to America, and


were able to have children.\textsuperscript{12} The \textit{nisei}, or second-generation Japanese Americans, attended school alongside the children of other immigrant workers, and some even went on to university. But just as they began to fully integrate themselves into American culture, World War II began. The internment of Japanese Americans, beginning in February 1942 across the West Coast, stopped their economic and social assimilation, as well as any progress that they had made in being accepted as Americans.

Another Asian demographic, Filipino Americans, was also growing at this time. Because the Philippines were a territory of the United States, Filipinos were considered U.S. Nationals and were not affected by the Immigration Act of 1917, also known as the Asiatic Barred Zone Act. The immigration wave from the Filipinos brought enough migrants to establish an all-male Filipino Club at Pasadena Junior College, while others filled the roles of domestics, cooks, and chauffeurs as earlier Chinese and Japanese laborers had.

After World War II, many Japanese Americans never returned to their homes in the San Gabriel Valley. However, some of those that did were able to reopen their fathers’ businesses and live once more in the houses of their childhood. Ted Tajima, whose father was the pastor of the Japanese Union Church of Pasadena, was able to become the first Asian-American high school teacher at Alhambra High, instructing students in English and journalism.

Another \textit{nisei}, Shig Kawai, went back to live in the house that he was born in, which had been built by his carpenter father. He was bitter over the fact that Jackie Robinson, his teammate at Pasadena Junior College and the California All-Star baseball

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team of 1936, was able to pursue his career in sports while Shig had been racially profiled and imprisoned for having Japanese ancestry. Shig eventually went into gardening in Pasadena, and built a dental lab and a hearing aid company.\textsuperscript{13}

The Asian-American populace of San Gabriel Valley had dropped in numbers by the 1950s. New infrastructure, such as malls and freeways, was being built over the farms that their ancestors had labored over. New homes were being sold to White Americans that were migrating west. By the ‘60s, the remaining small groups of Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino Americans were simply doing their best to fit in with their Anglo neighbors.

However, they still held onto their culture. Chinatown and Little Tokyo continued as locales where Asian Americans could shop for specialty food items and participate in Asian-American sports leagues. Pre-war Japanese cultural centers in Pasadena, Temple City, and West Covina were kept active. They taught language, martial arts, and held community events for traditional Japanese holidays such as obon festivals to honor their ancestors and mochitsuki, the pounding of rice into mochi for the New Year. The Hughes Markets became one of the first supermarket chains to feature an ethnic section especially for their Japanese American clientele, stocking it with specialty food items around the New Year.\textsuperscript{14}

The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 ended an earlier quota system, and established a new immigration policy. The law was passed with the intention of attracting skilled labor to the United States, and reuniting immigrant families. The resulting surge of Asian immigrants to the United States was primarily focused on the


area around Los Angeles. Many of the immigrants of this new wave were highly
educated and upper middle-class, arriving in the U.S. with their entire families. On the
other end of the spectrum were refugees from Southeast Asia, most arriving after 1975.

Monterey Park’s Development and Political Conflicts

Beginning in the late 1970s, new Mandarin-speaking families purchased suburban
homes in Monterey Park. Fred Hsieh, a realtor, hoped to develop what would later
become called “Little Taipei,” a suburban hub of Asian Americans. Monterey Park was
east of Chinatown and downtown Los Angeles, and it had a better public education
system than the urban areas. Families that had or were planning to have children valued
this as an opportunity for the next generation. Additionally, the immigrants were attracted
to the idea of suburban life, where they could have brand new homes. Many of the new
arrivals were from urban areas in their native countries, where they likely lived in
cramped structures or shared apartment rooms. Comparatively, the spacious suburban
neighborhood was luxurious. Their language barrier was also brought up as a reason for
buying new homes. “With our limited English skills, we preferred newer homes to avoid
the hassle of calling in plumbers, electricians and the like.”15 The community’s status as
an attractive neighborhood for Asian Americans was cemented by the Diho Market,
which sold fresh Asian produce, meat cuts that could not be found in typical American
grocery stores, and other specific ingredients that the new arrivals were used to having in
their kitchens.16

16 Timothy Fong, The First Suburban Chinatown: The Remaking of Monterey Park, California (Asian
The Asian population of Monterey Park grew slowly but steadily. Eventually, the city itself received recognition as an “All-American City” with an ethnically mixed City Council. One Asian-American member was Lily Lee Chen, who first came to the U.S. from China for higher education. Later, after becoming a parent, she was active with organizations like the PTA and Boy Scouts. Her interest in community involvement led her to run for the City Council in 1982. Another council member was Filipino American Monty Manibog, an attorney who had previously participated in the 1952 Helsinki Olympics for wrestling as a youth.

In 1985, Councilwoman Lily Chen became the first Chinese American to be elected mayor in the United States. That same year, older white residents of Monterey Park, led by Barry Hutch and Fred Arcuri, began a grassroots movement in protest of the “invasion” of mini-malls, condos, and Asians. They felt that their way of life was being threatened by the increasing prominence of Asian Americans in the neighborhood.\(^{18}\)

The protest movement, originally slow growing, began to gain traction and become overtly racist. A vote was put in place to have English as the official language of the city, and limit or restrict non-English business signs. These actions were protested by Chinese American residents, who pointed out that “many of the local street names used the Spanish language, and [there were] others with Italian, German and French.”\(^{19}\) Despite the rebuttal, the City Council approved the drafting of a proposal that would further restrict Chinese-language business signs. All five council members voted

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unanimously for a compromise proposal, which called for more English translation than required in the law that the council had adopted four months previously.

Councilman David Almada, who proposed the tougher ordinance in the first place, stated that a petition drive led by Arcuri was the driving force behind the proposal. In an article from the *Los Angeles Times*, Almada stated, “More than 3,000 people signed that petition. You’d have to be ignorant not to pay attention to that.” His fellow Councilman Cam Briglio added, “I just want to take the heat off…They’re ready to shoot us out there.” Even Filipino American Councilman Manibog admitted that the signs were an issue. “The petition drive brought it to a head, but this was something we had to consider sooner or later. From the beginning, people weren’t happy with the sign ordinance.”

The pre-existing sign ordinance only required business owners to display a commercial sign with the street address in Arabic numerals. The proposal was to strengthen the standards, by requiring all businesses to identify the nature of their enterprise with basic terms such as “restaurant,” “dental office,” or “preschool.” Businesses that had a logo which could be understood by everyone would be exempt. According to City Attorney Richard J. Morillo, “the ostensible reason for adopting a more restrictive sign law was the need for police and fire personnel to be able to readily identify the location of a business during an emergency.” Still, the argument based on legality and safety seemed like an afterthought of frustrated protesters who cared more about the visually distinct, unfamiliar language than the clarity of the signage.

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21 Ibid.
Councilwoman Chen, who had long regarded the signage issue as a potential problem for the community, was well aware of the growing racial tension. In the midst of the conflict, she voiced concern that such regulations might violate the Constitution, as business signs could be considered a form of commercial speech. Morillo agreed with her that the council could not risk infringing on free speech, and worked with them to avoid doing so. The resulting proposal that was not as strict as some of the protestors demanded, but would not be in danger of breaking the First Amendment.

However, the new ordinance was not tough enough for everyone. Arcuri, one of the leaders of the English Only movement, continued to be a promoter of the English as an Official Language initiative. He felt that the Council’s proposal wouldn’t have enough effect to force a significant change in the “Asian marketplace look” of Monterey Park, and suggested that he would start another petition to ban all foreign-language signs in the city. Arcuri’s use of the phrase “Asian marketplace look” reveals his preoccupation with the aesthetic of the neighborhood. He wanted Monterey Park to appear as a classic, white picket fence suburban neighborhood, but the Chinese signage broke the illusion and indicated that the residents were not all primarily white.

Although Arcuri claimed he had not started the petitions with the intention of causing division, he took obvious joy in the press attention and gave a decisive quote to the LA Times. “They’re putting their signs in Chinese because they think their language and customs are superior to ours. There’s a feeling of cultural superiority. Why do you think so many Chinese businessmen open Chinese restaurants instead of American ones?” In contrast, Jerry Chin-Chun Ha spoke before the Monterey Park City Council, his

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speech translated from Chinese by Councilwoman Chen, and explained why he had originally posted only a Chinese sign. “I opened my beauty shop with Chinese signs because I do not speak very good English. I was afraid I would not meet the expectations of the (English-speaking) customers.”

In October of 1988, Barry Hatch, one of the aforementioned leaders of the English Only movement, took over as mayor of Monterey Park a year after he was elected into the council. Hatch was known for his bold views, which many of his critics considered divisive in such a diverse community. Although Hatch spoke rusty but passable Chinese from his past as a Mormon missionary in Hong Kong, he was a strong supporter of making English the national language for all of the U.S and outright banning immigration to the country for a year. He caused a minor scandal by referring to immigrants as “hordes of invaders” in a letter to candidates for national and state offices. “Here comes the world into our backyard and we’re all saying: ‘All is well in Disneyland.’” This statement showed Hatch’s perspective – that the people welcoming immigrants, or at least passively accepting their presence, were foolish for doing so. He felt that the immigration wave was an active threat to America and its status quo.

During Hatch’s term, more proposals emerged regarding the usage of Chinese on business and commercial signs, as well as restrictions on new construction in order to halt the increase of new buildings and renovations for Chinese businesses and apartment

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buildings. The moratorium on construction was challenged and then lifted the following year, but the damage was done – many Asian residents and businesses began moving towards the neighboring city of Alhambra, where there was no legislation in place to impede their development. It was only once officials realized that the shift had resulted in a significant loss in business revenue that efforts were made to reach out to the Asian-American community and encourage relocation to Monterey Park.

Since the turn of the century, Monterey Park continues to be a city known for its prominent Asian-American presence. Despite the efforts of Arcuri, Hatch and other proponents of the English Only campaign, signs across the city’s business and shopping areas still feature a mix of English and Chinese characters, representing the mixed ethnicities of the neighborhood. Newer development of Asian-oriented stores, such as grocery chains that offer ethnic food products, spark some indignation from white residents, but others point towards the city’s history and shake their heads. “Monterey Park went through a lot of upheaval that a lot of people regret,” said Timothy Fong, and added, “Change is inevitable. If white yuppies were moving in, would they be complaining? I doubt it.”

Community and Suburban Ideals: The Wat Thai Buddhist Temple

In the same decade that Monterey Park began its development, a Thai community about 25 miles northwest was working to build a religious and cultural center in their own suburban neighborhood, The Wai Thai Buddhist Temple of Sun Valley, near Los

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Angeles, first opened its doors in 1974. As the first Thai Buddhist temple in the country, it continues to serve as the only example of Thai-inspired architecture in a Buddhist temple found in the United States. Located at the edge of North Hollywood, the meditation center is an easily visible landmark against the expected skyline of the neighborhood, its gold-trimmed peaks rising high over the horizon line of clay shingle roofs surrounding it. Beyond the golden gates and religious statuary lie the typical palm trees and decorative shrubbery typical of this region. But this contrast is only a visual indicator of an underlying difference in culture, which has historically led to conflict between the temple’s members and neighboring white residents. More than foreign architecture, the real problem has lied in opposing expectations and conflict over which groups of people have the right to suburbia and to define, or redefine, the suburban ideal.

In the post-WWII era, the accepted ideal of suburbia was white and exclusive – an ideal constructed by the fact that white Americans were given opportunities such as loans and mortgages that were not available to people of color. Suburban development was targeted towards white homebuyers because they were the demographic that had the means to purchase these homes. Meanwhile, urban areas were slowly becoming synonymous with ethnic areas as more immigrants arrived in America and settled in enclaves. Thus, suburban neighborhoods served as spacious escapes from the increasingly crowded cities.

In the 1950s and ‘60s, the San Fernando Valley began challenging this archetype. In its early planning and construction, the community builders Henry J. Kaiser and Fritz B. Burns believed “economic and social stratification to be un-American,” so they “intentionally programmed heterogeneity into the development” by building a variety of
homes that were affordable to families from all different backgrounds and income levels.\textsuperscript{27} Communities were planned prior to residents moving in with the thought of introducing additional jobs and housing at the city’s periphery.

It is important to note that although Kaiser and Burns tried to be inclusive regarding class diversity, their project was racially-restricted. Pre-existing ethnic pockets that consisted of Black, Mexican-, Japanese- and Chinese-Americans had been on the eastern side of the Valley since the late 1700s, but these groups were separate from Kaiser and Burn’s developed Valley by “invisible borders, as well as freeways and thoroughfares.”\textsuperscript{28} This began to change in the 1970s, when a large wave of immigrants arrived in the region. This was most visible on the east side, with many of the new arrivals settling in neighborhoods that were already clustered by their ethnic or racial group. The Immigration Act of 1965 as well as the growth of the Asian-American middle class were some of the main causes of this sudden flux.\textsuperscript{29}

The rapid growth of the previously segregated ethnic enclaves caused them to expand into territory that was originally considered exclusive to upper middle-class whites. As these immigrant communities grew, many residents also felt the desire to establish a place of gathering for religious and community purposes. In July 1968, Phramaha Singsathon Naraspo and two other Thai monks traveled across the region to find a location that would be suitable to build what would be the first Theravada Buddhist temple in the United States.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{28}Mary Corbin Sies and Christopher Silver, \textit{Planning the Twentieth-Century American City} (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996).
\textsuperscript{29}Kevin Roderick, \textit{The San Fernando Valley: America’s Suburb}. 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Times Books, 2001).
Even in its earliest days, there were many attempts to prevent the temple’s construction. At the beginning, a small Thai group “began offering services in a single-family suburban house.”31 However, they were repeatedly cited for violating zoning codes, and were eventually forced to find another location to operate out of. In order to work around their difficulties with securing space for the temple, Punsak “Paul” Sosothikul, who was the president of Center, consulted with his wealthy parents back in Thailand. Vichai and Boonsum Sosothikul, the founders of what would become the Seacon Group, were able to loan him enough to purchase 2.2 acres of private land.32 He immediately donated the property to the group that was organizing the temple so that they could begin construction for a proper religious center.

While the initial investment came from Sosothikul, the local Thai community was responsible for the actual building and management of the temple’s eventual operations. Many members secured additional funding by soliciting in the United States as well as in Thailand, having maintained connections to family and friends in their home country. They successfully raised over a million dollars to cover the construction costs of the main hall and a two-story cultural center.33 Others who did not possess private wealth were able to instead donate their time and labor. Before construction could begin, the lot had to be cleared of existing foliage and debris, which did not require any technical skills or

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knowledge, and could be done by everyone. Padoongpat described the situation by saying, “Developing the space, in essence, felt like a communal responsibility.”

The communal efforts that drove the temple’s construction were representative of the Thai community’s hopes for their lives in Sun Valley. For them, the suburbs were an opportunity for them to set down roots in a new country and establish connections to their culture. The Thai suburban ideal had an emphasis on community gathering and having close relationships with neighbors, in direct contrast to the traditional construction of the suburbs as a space of peace and privacy. Being a ‘good neighbor’ meant ‘respecting each other’s property’ more than it meant supporting each other through difficult times or celebrating in happier days.

Once the Wat Thai Buddhist Temple was finished with construction and actively running, the Thai community used the temple not only for religious practice but festivals, food fairs, or celebrating cultural holidays. It became the center of their community and played a critical role in the development of Thai-American suburban culture in the area. The documented intent of the temple was to “operate as a non-profit corporation for the interchange of Buddhist information and education between the United States and Thailand.” As a result, while there were many religious services such as prayer sessions and meditation, there were also many events that served to promote and instruct on Thai culture. The temple offered cooking, sewing, and language classes. The head monk, Phra Thepsophon, expressed that the goal of these activities was “to protect the community....[from] the impact [of] the aggressive nature of American culture and youth.

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35Theravada Buddhist Center, Articles of Incorporation, 2.
problems.” These classes and activities helped preserve the community’s cultural heritage and allowed them to pass it on to the second generation of Thai Americans. Additionally, it passed on skills essential for the younger members to grow up, become independent adults, and return on the community’s investment in them.

The recreational events that were held at the Wat Thai Buddhist Temple in the first few years drew tens of thousands of Thais as well as Cambodians, Vietnamese, and Laotians who shared similar traditions and holidays. Temple officials and community leaders organized a number of weekend festivals as well as celebrations for Thai national holidays. In October 1979, the Wat Thai was even visited by the “Supreme Patriarch,” an awkward translation of the Thai title that is the equivalent of the Pope. In 1984, the supreme commander of the Royal Armed Forces of Thailand, Arthit Kamlang-Ek, also visited the Wat Thai and planted a tree on the grounds as observed by thousands of spectators in the early morning. The acknowledgement of these acclaimed visitors from their home country helped the Thai community feel validated about their efforts to establish themselves in the United States, and also helped to strengthen the enduring relations between Thai Americans and Thailand.

However, not everyone in Sun Valley was thrilled about the progress of the Wat Thai Buddhist Temple. The crowds that the temple’s events drew brought a great deal of traffic and noise with them to the Valley, which began to cause friction amongst neighboring white residents. By the early 1980s, the officials of the Wat Thai and the local Thai community were engaged in a legal conflict with the “Neighborhood Committee,” which consisted of a majority of white suburban homeowners. (There was

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36 Surongsain and Mabalot, “Wat Thai of Los Angeles,” 156.
one Latina homeowner, who was the only non-white person on the committee.) The Neighborhood Committee accused the Wat Thai of violating city zoning codes, and appealed to the Los Angeles Zoning Administration to intervene in the temple’s activities. They protested that the temple’s festivals and community events caused parking problems, noise pollution, and trash, “which threatened their quality of life.” The Committee issued at least two separate zoning grievances: one that specifically targeted the Thai festivals, and another against the Wai Thai Buddhist Temple as an institution.38

In 1982, David Wygand, chair of the Neighborhood Committee and a neighbor of the Wat Thai, submitted a letter and petition with approximately two hundred signatures to Ernani Bernardi, the Los Angeles City Councilman.

The letter requested that the Zoning Administration assess the negative impact of the Thai festivals and suggested that the Wai Thai was violating its conditional-use permit, which had been granted ten years ago. Said conditional-use permit designated the Wai Thai as a “low-key, non-intrusive site of worship and meditation for up to 160 persons.” The festivals and other recreational events were known to draw crowds far beyond the small number that was designated in the permit.

The petitions and written requests eventually found their way to the Chief Zoning Administrator, Judge Robert Janovici, who then issued an order to have the temple inspected by a zoning analyst. After two visits, the analyst sided with the protesting homeowners of the Neighborhood Committee. In his report, he wrote that “temple noise was a disturbance to the surrounding areas,” that he found “visitors illegally parked and unneighborly, uncooperative, unconcerned, and inconsiderate and nasty to residents of

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38 City of Los Angeles, Department of City Planning: Office of Zoning Administration Papers, January 19, 1984, Los Angeles City Archives, Case No. CUZ 84–228, 7.
the area when confronted about it.”39 The response to this assessment was to lay down a number of new rules that the Wai Thai Buddhist Temple would have to abide by in order to continue operating.

The Temple was tasked with: (1) reducing the number of outdoor festivities from one per week to one per month, (2) securing additional off-street parking, (3) maintaining a litter pickup campaign led by Boy Scouts, (4) towing away illegally parked cars using two trucks owned by Thai businessmen, (5) reducing hours of use and duration of the sound amplification system, (6) establishing communication with residents by opening a complaint line, (7) providing an English-speaking booth at all festivals, and (8) educating its congregation about their responsibility to be respectful of the surrounding neighborhood by complying with these measures.40

While these rulings are simple, specific, and appear to be reasonable terms, they also demonstrate the mindset of the primarily white homeowners. Among the rules are requests to accommodate or prioritize English as the primary language of communication, to restrict the number of people allowed into the neighborhood, regulate who was allowed in the space, and to maintain clean, quiet streets with sufficient parking. They drew clear lines about what was expected from a suburban environment as opposed to an urban one. Some of the residents specifically compared the problems caused by the temple festivals to similar disturbances in urban neighborhoods that were primarily populated by immigrants. These were problems of overcrowding and unruly residents

39City of Los Angeles, Department of City Planning: Office of Zoning Administration Papers, January 19, 1984, Los Angeles City Archives, Case No. CUZ 84–228, 9-10.
40City of Los Angeles, Department of City Planning: Office of Zoning Administration Papers, January 19, 1984, Los Angeles City Archives, Case No. CUZ 84–228, 11.
that people associated with urban areas, and did not want in their peaceful suburban neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{41}

Wygand and the rest of the Neighborhood Committee, throughout these proceedings and the ones that would follow in the coming years, maintained the stance that their opposition against the Wai Thai was not because it was a Buddhist temple or a community center primarily used by non-white members of the community. They stated that the recreational events and festivities that the Wat Thai regularly held were outside the acceptable parameters of their permit, and were invasive to the privacy and peace of mind of the surrounding neighborhood. Their resistance to its activities and operations were only for these reasons. In fact, a Committee member claimed, in a written complaint to the Department of City Planning later that year, “the problems typically occur on festival days... The rest of the time the temple... is a very quiet place with very few people on the site.... It is the nation’s largest Thai Buddhist temple. It could be a landmark for Sun Valley.”\textsuperscript{42}

Despite various such statements released by members of the Neighborhood Committee, it was difficult to separate the obvious racial component from the conflict. Even if it was claimed that the main irritants were issues of noise, littering, and parking, it was inevitable that the larger public would see this as a dispute with racial motives. Committee member George Carroll admitted that he felt apprehensive and even guilty about this in the \textit{Los Angeles Times}: “A number of us feel a sense of regret. We’re not against the temple or the Thais. We even have inhibitions complaining about this,

\textsuperscript{41} Tanachai Mark Padoongpatt. \textquote{A Landmark for Sun Valley': Wat Thai of Los Angeles and Thai American Suburban Culture in 1980s San Fernando Valley.} 96.

\textsuperscript{42} City of Los Angeles, Department of City Planning-Community Planning Case Review and Comments, December 5, 1984, Los Angeles City Archives, Case No. CUZ 84–228, 4.
because it is a religious thing; it is a racial thing.” Wygand followed this statement with his perspective that the conflict was born from cultural differences, but that these differences were not irreconcilable. “They’ve [Wat Thai visitors] been misunderstanding, and we’re trying to set them on the right track. A lot of it is lack of knowledge of the laws of our country.”

Officials from the Wai Thai and members of the Thai community were eager to accept this line of reasoning, and used it themselves at public hearings. Supporters stated that visitors were simply unfamiliar with Western culture or the expected ways of conduct, and that these problems could be solved through educational programs. A Thai food vendor attributed the issue to the fact that U.S. laws were more detailed and strict in establishing social order, whereas the laws of Thailand were loosely if at all enforced by the corrupt government. Even a Wat Thai secretary and monk Phra Sombat Seelasara expressed sympathy with the protestors. “I think it’s our fault, not [our neighbors’] fault. If we understood them and they understood us, this wouldn’t have happened.”

Another monk, Phra Thepsophon wrote to Wygand in the summer of 1984: “[W]e certainly appreciate your helping the Temple to correct the problems of the past and look forward to your advising us on matters concerning future activities… [W]e know that in this way we will be better able to strengthen the relationship between our neighborhood friends and the Temple and people of Thailand.”

Another issue that emerged was class. Amongst the temple’s congregation, there were growing divisions, partially due to the arrival of a new generation of immigrants as

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45 Formal Letter from Phra Thepsophon to David Wygand, August 28, 1984, Los Angeles City Archives, Case No. CUZ 84–228.
well as additional non-Thai members. The core of the congregation – temple officials and Thai community leaders – were all middle-class. Many had been part of the first wave of Thai immigrants, and by this point were all well-educated. They owned homes and a variety of small businesses such as restaurants or grocery stores. By the 1980s, a second wave of younger, working class immigrants arrived who had little grasp of English, and were working in less respected positions as cooks, busboys, maids, or janitors. As new arrivals, they flocked to the Wat Thai Buddhist Temple in search of a community to integrate themselves into. The officials of the Wai Thai may have been worried that the presence of visibly lower class congregation members would harm the temple’s overall reputation, and thus advocated education as a solution to the problems that had been brought up.

The other subgroup of the congregation that was considered lower-class were the Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian groups. The Thai people considered them low-class refugees, and some members of the community lay the blame for the conflict at their feet. Jintana Noochia-or told the Los Angeles Times, “Lots of refugees came over from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam [and] they have no home. [They] came to the Thai temple... They didn’t know how to behave. We try to say, ‘Be careful when you park.’ We have to be strict [with] them.”

This scapegoating of other ethnic groups revealed another expression of the class divisions within the Wat Thai congregation.

Regardless of the various pointed fingers, the Wat Thai officials came up with a solution that they thought would solve the issue: buying the homes that were on property adjacent to the temple. They planned to fill those houses with monks and members of the Thai community who would obviously have no issue with the noise or proximity to the

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temple’s festivities. The hope was that this might serve as a buffer between the Wat Thai and the larger Sun Valley neighborhood. However, the plan backfired and actually increased their neighbors’ suspicion. They were accused of attempting to re-zone the neighborhood and lower the overall property value.\textsuperscript{47} The Neighborhood Committee raised concerns about how many visitors or monks were living in the four purchased residences, with suggestions that the single-family homes were being overcrowded and being used for non-domestic purposes to the benefit of the temple.

The temple lawyer, David Christianson, was a white American who came up with a strategy to preserve the Wat Thai’s food festivals and other gatherings. While the media and public pointed at the racism of the homeowners and urged the Wat Thai officials to call attention to it, Christianson felt that “bringing up race would be ‘counterproductive’ because ‘there’s always a little bit of racism.’”\textsuperscript{48} Instead, he advised them to advocate that food, and the food festivals, played an integral role in their religion as well as the upkeep of the temple. Firstly, leaders of the temple could argue that the proceeds of the food festivals mostly returned in the form of donations to the temple, which helped support the monks who lived there. Additionally, Thai Buddhist rituals were lengthy affairs – those who came to visit would often stay for most of the day to speak with the monks and bring their immediate family along with them. Thus, food was necessary to keep everyone from going hungry during these religious experiences. Lastly, moving the festivals to an off-site location would also interrupt and devalue their religious practice. The Wat Thai

\textsuperscript{47}Viola Smith, Letter to City of Los Angeles Zoning Administration, December 28, 1984, Los Angeles City Archives, Case No. CUZ 84.
temple and the local neighborhood “typified the natural surroundings of a Buddhist Church in the Asian country of Thailand.”

This line of reasoning eventually succeeded in winning the Zoning Administration over. In January 1984, it was ruled that the Wat Thai would not have their conditional-use permit revoked and they were legally allowed to continue holding their festivals, although there were some restrictions placed on how many large scale events they could have per year and a specific definition for how many attendees constituted large scale - 160 people. The notable aspect of this win was that because the officials had made the argument that “Thai Buddhism [was] a community affair and not individualized meditation or prayer,” they were able to redefine how they could use public space and express their culture in their suburban neighborhood.

In the following years, as the temple expanded to build a school and continued their public events, Wygand and his fellow homeowners made unsuccessful attempts to press further charges before eventually giving up. “We are tired of being painted as villains,” Wygand told a Los Angeles Times reporter. He reportedly then approached Christianson and told him, “I’m not [going] to fight you people anymore; you’ll never hear from me again!” Part of their exhaustion with the battle came from the outpouring of criticism from the media and public – over time, the Wat Thai managed to gain a great number of supporters. Some of their proponents had a great deal of power and influence, such as Tom Bradley, who was the city’s first African American mayor. Although

50 *Ibid* 103.
Bradley did not directly donate money to the temple, he often attended events and was able to offer them political support as well as his presence as a major public figure.

Yet a friend in a high place was not what allowed the Wat Thai to continue its operations to the present day. It was the Thai officials’ ability to reach out the larger community – besides the homeowners of the Neighborhood Committee, the temple managed to win over “a critical mass of neighborhood residents,” many of whom testified at hearings. Other religious organizations also wrote letters of support, such as the Protestant National Council of Churches, the Catholic Diocese, and other major Jewish and Buddhist temples. The members of the Wat Thai temple were able to take their suburban ideal and cultivate it, making relationships with all kinds of people that would traditionally have nothing to do with each other.

Their emphasis on community gathering and neighborly relations extended to those outside of their immediate Thai community. Wat Thai festivals were open to the public, and non-Buddhists who came to visit out of curiosity were welcomed and encouraged to learn more without attempts to convert them to the religion. This friendly attitude garnered a positive response from the majority of the public, which bolstered the Thais’ efforts to carve out a space for their cultural and religious practices. As a community, they were able to redefine who had the rights to public space, how they could use it, and change their local suburban culture.

**Architecture as a Sign of Changing Times: The McMansion**

Since the turn of the century, many residents of Silicon Valley are finding that their new neighbors have very different ideas about home renovation. As more well off Chinese immigrants arrive in the area, the local architecture is changing - and not
everyone is happy about it. The spread of McMansions, interjected in between the standard townhouses one might expect to find in suburban areas, has been met with disdain. They stand out from the local landscape due to their size, elaborate designs, and disregard for the tradition of lawns. Visually, these houses interrupt the uniformity of the American suburb – and they are an indicator of how the local population as well as the global economy has shifted.

The term McMansion, begun in California in the 1980s, is one of a few that references the global brand McDonalds. It draws associations between houses with no clear style of architecture and the mass production of generic fast food. In the last decade, this word has been more commonly used to refer to a housing trend in China featuring ostentatious, Western-styled mansions. There, McMansion does not just reference mass-produced food, but actually describes homes that are mass-produced in parts before being shipped and assembled on site.

Also not-so-affectionately coined as ‘Monster Houses,’ McMansions began in China as a symbol of wealth for the country’s growing upper middle-class. Oversized mishmashes of Western architecture from different times and places, these elaborate, expensive villas were meant to showcase the worldliness of their owners. The Chinese economy boomed when the American economy took a downward turn in 2006, leading to a new generation acquiring expendable income. Houses for individuals, as opposed to large, multi-family complexes, have not been built in China since the 1930s.51 Spending on spacious, independent housing was a way to make an extravagant statement about new wealth.

The funding for construction comes from primarily two categories of buyers. The first were those who come from traditionally rich families who have had the benefit of higher education. Their tastes tend to lean towards the low-key and simple, supposedly as a result of their cultured upbringing. On the other end are tuhao, slang for the nouveau riche who have come into their wealth more recently as a result of the government reducing their involvement in businesses. Tuhaos are seen as people with a lot of money but little education, and are commonly thought to have gaudy preferences; purchasing luxury baroque, Tudor, or rococo-style villas. As a result of the high demand, gated compounds have sprung up outside central Beijing containing buildings that range from tasteful interpretations of Spanish, Italian, French, and Roman architecture to complete recreations of famous homes like Versailles and the White House.

The state of Chinese real estate has developed over time in reaction to their changing government and society. Historically, European-style homes were mainly found in cities with foreign concessions for international trade settlements, where Western businessmen resided for work related purposes. Today, embracing Western architecture is far more common throughout China. These foreign-style homes indicate a newfound freedom of choice for Chinese consumers, and reflect the desire to be associated with money, power, and cultural influence.

The Cultural Revolution, which took place between 1966 and 1976, destroyed a significant portion of Chinese heritage and has had lasting effect to the present day. Several historical sites were damaged or destroyed as well as artifacts, works of art, and literature. Hundreds of artists and scholars who were seen as proponents of older thinking were persecuted and imprisoned, with many of them dying due to the harsh conditions
they suffered. Education was severely affected by the closing of schools and universities. Traditional Chinese elements are now sometimes shunned due to the public relating them with recent struggles and poverty.\textsuperscript{52} European architecture not only fills a cultural void but also represents economic success.

Beyond aesthetics, these compounds are an attractive option for Chinese homeowners because of their location. Cities like Shanghai and Beijing are already cramped and also experience the more intense levels of air pollution. China accounts for 40\% of worldwide premature deaths caused by air pollution, and is the largest emitter of carbon dioxide. By moving to these European-inspired compounds that are on the city’s fringes, residents enjoy considerably more space and cleaner air.

This interpretation of architecture has made its way back to the West through a flood of Chinese buyers looking to drop their excess money into real estate across the world. A stock market crash and China’s volatile economy has resulted in an unprecedented eagerness to invest outside their country as Chinese citizens grow concerned over the value of the yuan. Additionally, money earned from corruption is easier spent after being converted to foreign currency and used abroad.\textsuperscript{53} Some have chosen to settle in suburbs in the United States, considering proximity to the best schools and universities for their children, as well as the potential for green cards. The purchase of property allows them to take advantage of a federal program that fast tracks them for residency.

\textsuperscript{52}Jiaqi Yan, Gao Gao, Danny Wynn Ye Kwok, \textit{Turbulent decade: a history of the cultural revolution}, Honolulu Univ. of Hawai‘i Press 1996, p.73

Most buyers seek multiple homes, bought with cash, with the intention of living in one and holding onto the others as investments. These homes are often purchased with a great deal of foresight. The first home may be in proximity to an acclaimed grade school that is appropriate for their children’s age, and another home may be closer to a university that they hope to attend. Until the children are old enough, the latter would be rented out so that the property can earn money and eventually turn a profit.

Some of these buyers belong to what has been dubbed ‘transnational families,’ where the children may primarily reside in the United States for the sake of their education but their parents or guardians travel between the U.S. and their native country. Transnational families bypass the traditional expectations of immigration, and technically cannot be called “Asian American” since they do not necessarily identify as American. These families, dubbed “Trans-Pacific commuters” by Shenglin Chang, live in “two homes at once,” referring to the impermanent nature of their stay in the U.S.54 The presence and movement of transnational commuters is important to note for a variety of reasons. “Transnational flows of people, capital, and commodities,” as described by Becky Nicolaides, establish a steady connection between American ethnoburbs and the home country of the residents.55 The presence of transnational families ensures that this relationship is not estranged, and also encourages a regular flow of new immigrants to existing settlements and an increase in the ethnic clustering pattern.

Transnational commuters break the mold of the historical Asian immigrant narrative. Their regular travels are primarily for business reasons, with the education of

their children also being a concern. However, there are also many instances when commuters purchase suburban property as an investment. After being bought, many of these houses stay empty and unoccupied. As a result, part of the criticism against this practice of purchase from international buyers is that it interrupts the community atmosphere and takes away housing opportunities for potential residents that would actually live in the neighborhood.

McMansions are part of a larger global trend that spans from Vancouver to Sydney as many Chinese look to migrate or simply invest outside of their country, but in California they have sparked a certain degree of negative reaction and resistance from local residents and businesses.\textsuperscript{56} Chinese purchasers may buy homes that neighbor one another, and then tear down the original buildings in order to construct a so-called ‘Monster House’ across both properties. These houses are built at an inflated scale in order to accommodate multi-generational families, which are standard for Chinese culture but considered a sign of poverty or failure on the children’s behalf in the U.S.\textsuperscript{57} Trees are ripped out and lawns are built over, breaking the suburban mold of taking pride in green, neatly mowed lawns with organized flowerbeds and a picket fence.

The resistance to the presence of these constructions and their Chinese owners has led to demand for legal action and restrictions. In 1999, two cities in the Silicon Valley passed regulations that limited the height and floor space ratio for new houses as well as requiring a certain minimum of landscape space. In addition, the agreement of neighbors became part of the criteria for issuing new housing permits. In the Los Angeles


community of Arcadia, legal action was not enough – the ‘monster houses’ there experienced vandalism, presumably from irate local residents.

Taking action against the homeowners is complicated due to purchases made through cash and intermediaries that deal with possible language barriers. The paperwork, if any exists, often traces back to China with fake names or to shell corporations that are difficult to contact or hold accountable. At the current time, a number of legislative battles are being waged in an effort to halt or control the development of new McMansions or force renovations on existing ones. Activist movements such as No More McMansions in Los Angeles are busy drafting emails to city officials, gathering petition signatures, and attending hearings to advocate stricter ordinances.\(^\text{58}\)

All of this raises the question of whether the problem is eyesore architecture or the presence of Chinese immigrants themselves. After all, it has been pointed out that the construction of ridiculous houses is not necessarily a phenomenon unique to the Chinese, and yet the debate that these McMansions have sparked often has racial overtones that suggest a certain incompatibility with American society. This leads to the question posed by Peter S. Li – is the issue truly about ‘unneighborly houses,’ or do locals actually have a problem with their new Chinese neighbors?\(^\text{59}\)

It is arguable that the answer is both. The protests against McMansions are not without reasonable cause – they are visually disruptive, and some shamelessly break conventional standards and safety laws in their construction. The occasional lack of


occupants is also a valid concern. However, what is notable, after analyzing three different situations in various time periods across California, is what hasn’t changed – the language used by the opponents in each of these cases.

Without fail, the visible presence of Asians and Asian Americans is regarded as an invasion of the local territory. The refusal to assimilate, and the desire to instead make changes that allow for their respective needs and cultures, is continuously met with disdain. Even in a region where Asian Americans have settled for over a hundred years, they are always foreign. They are always Asian before they are regarded as American.

What is also apparent after looking at these different situations are the ways in which Asian Americans have changed their neighborhoods and challenged ideas about what is acceptable or desirable in suburbs. Rather than assimilating, the cases that have been detailed show Asian Americans fighting to change laws and public perception - and winning. Analyzing and highlighting such instances in Asian-American history is important in order to teach future generations about the struggles that the supposed ‘model minority’ demographic has faced in the past, but also to prove that Asian Americans have not played as passive a role in the development of American culture as the traditional immigrant narrative might suggest.
Bibliography


