

# Ever-Changing 'Heights'

## Immigrants Bring Enclave New Identity

By MARITA HERNANDEZ,  
Times Staff Writer

Della Clementi was captivated by the scent of orange blossoms, the blue skies and palm trees that greeted her and her Italian-born parents upon their arrival in Los Angeles 50 years ago.

A less pleasant memory was the family's reception from their new Irish, English and German neighbors, who had settled Los Angeles' first suburb east of the Los Angeles River in the late 1800s, when Lincoln Heights was a chic new residential community.

"They didn't want us here very much," she recalled.

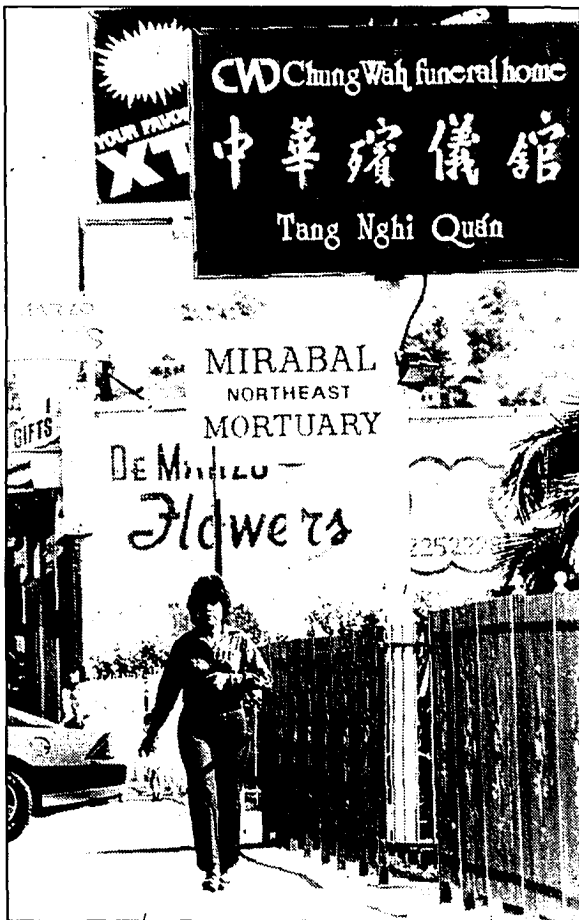
Over the years, Clementi has seen her family's story repeated as succeeding waves of Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants, in search of cheap housing, turned the aging East Los Angeles community into a Latino enclave.

At 73, Clementi is witnessing yet another transformation, as another immigrant group trying to establish itself in a new country takes the place of her Spanish-speaking neighbors. It is a common story in Los Angeles, reflective of the ever-changing makeup of the city's population.

The influx of Vietnam Chinese refugees into Lincoln Heights has been so swift and pervasive that most residents—Mexican and Chinese alike—predict that Lincoln Heights will inevitably become an extension of Chinatown, which lies just west, across the Los Angeles River.

The only question, they say, is how long it will take.

Although there is no evidence of conflict, talk among established residents about the rapid change is often tinged with resentment.



"They're taking over" is a frequent comment, as homes are scooped up by Vietnam Chinese buyers as fast as they go on the market and as Chinese and Vietnamese lettering replaces Spanish store signs on North Broadway, the community's main commercial strip.

They are credited with providing an economic stimulus to the

community, admired for their hard-work ethic and family unity. Yet they are simultaneously viewed as economic competition, criticized for their reliance on government assistance and for their clannishness.

Both groups point to their language difference as a major barrier.

Spanish- and Chinese-speaking



JOSE GALVEZ / Los Angeles Times

Scenes from changing Lincoln Heights: A woman, left, strolls past competing Latino and Oriental funeral home signs; Latino girls, above, at Albion Elementary School beside a mural with an Oriental motif, and, below, a Latino mural at North Broadway and Lincoln Park Avenue.



residents may live next-door to one another, but they inhabit different worlds. They attend different churches and social centers, belong to separate organizations and patronize different businesses.

Some express annoyance with some of the newcomers' non-conforming practices, such as a penchant for replacing front lawns

with vegetable gardens.

Although Clementi has grown to accept her neighborhood's ever-shifting character, she admitted that she finds the swiftness of the most recent change "disquieting" at times, especially upon receiving regular offers in the mail from Realtors eager to buy her home.

Still, recalling her family's his-

tory, Clementi reasons that "people who can't live in their own countries have to find a home somewhere."

For thousands of Vietnam Chinese—some say the largest concentration of the refugees in Los Angeles County—Lincoln Heights is quickly becoming home.

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# CHANGE: Transitional Community

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Of an estimated 100,000 Vietnamese refugees who have come to Los Angeles County since the fall of Saigon in 1975, about 40% are of Chinese origin. Cultural ties drew them to Chinatown, where many have established themselves as merchants. Unable to find housing in the crowded community, they began looking to neighboring areas, such as Echo Park, Monterey Park and Lincoln Heights.

Schools in the Lincoln Heights area that were overwhelmingly Latino just a decade ago are now about one-third Asian. Bilingual programs are offered in Chinese, as well as Spanish, and school notices go out to parents in three languages.

The new students are praised by teachers as hard-working and achievement-oriented. Although school officials say they have been successful in fostering interaction among Mexican and Chinese students, however, attempts to gain the participation of the new parents in school affairs have been less fruitful.

## 'An Important Part'

"Everything is new to the Chinese parents," said Dolores Beltran, bilingual coordinator at Gate Street Elementary School. "We have to keep reminding ourselves that that's where the Hispanic community was a few years ago and work to convince them that they are an important part of the school community."

Other community groups have been even less successful in drawing the participation of their new neighbors. Few Vietnam Chinese residents, for instance, have joined the community's active neighborhood watch program. According to police, however, there have been no signs of conflict or significant change in the area's reported crime rate, which remains among the lowest in the city.

Leaders in the Vietnam Chinese community explain that the new immigrants are handicapped by their unfamiliarity with English and with American ways.

Besides, they are too busy earning a living to join in community activities, said Vincent Cong Siu Ly, founder of the America Vietnam Chinese Friendship Assn., a community center in Lincoln Heights. Ly, a former member of South Vietnam's house of representatives, is part owner of a Chinatown grocery store and publishes one of three Vietnam-Chinese weekly newspapers in Los Angeles. He said Vietnam Chinese refugees have been better received in Lincoln Heights than in Chinatown, where the long-established Chinese, who consider the newcomers more Vietnamese than Chinese, have tended to ostracize them.

Noting that many of Lincoln Heights' Mexican residents are recent immigrants, like themselves, and that the two groups also share a similar income level, Ly said that the two groups tend to accept each other.

## Mutual Aid Groups

Until they feel more confident interacting with the larger community, however, Ly said they will look to each other for help through such mutual aid groups as the association he heads.

Funded entirely by contributions from its 1,600 members, the association offers such services as Chinese classes for youngsters and English classes for adults, immigration counseling, job-training referrals and activities for senior citizens and young people, according to Ly.

Many point to their traditional unity as the key to their success as a merchant class in Vietnam,



JOSE GALVEZ / Los Angeles Times

A man tends a front lawn garden in Lincoln heights; some residents object to such gardens.

where they were also a minority. In Lincoln Heights, this ability has served them well in their quest to become property owners and establish themselves in business.

The local Century 21 real estate office describes property in the area not as being "in Lincoln Heights" but as being "near Chinatown." About 90% of homes that go on the market are bought by Vietnam Chinese, agents said. And the demand for housing far out-

Chamber of Commerce. Some merchants complain that although they patronize the new Asian businesses in the area, the Vietnam Chinese do not reciprocate.

"We welcome the Asians as an asset to the community," said chamber President Steve Kasten, an area merchant for 15 years. "We just wish they would mix more."

Although Lincoln Heights has seen residents come and go, those who have stayed have managed to

of their parents. And a retired house painter and longtime area resident, who now runs a tiny cafe on North Broadway, has managed, nearly single-handed, to control graffiti in the neighborhood. With contributions from local merchants, he offers rewards for information that leads him to the culprits. Then he pays house calls on the perpetrator's parents, most of whom he knows personally.

Most of the customers at Fred Partida's cafe are either relatives or old friends. "It's more a community center than anything else," Partida said of the family-run business. Conversation there often turns to the changes in the neighborhood.

"The attitude, for the most part, is that they've got the money and are going to take over," Partida said.

Partida, whose history in East Los Angeles is marked by several episodes of being uprooted as Mexican neighborhoods were torn down to make way for public housing projects and other developments, said he is used to "being thrown out."

"Besides, the Italians were here before, and we threw them out," he said. "That's just the way it works."

Another longtime resident who, like Partida, chose to stay in the Mexican barrio while their contemporaries moved to outlying suburbs and more recent Mexican immigrants moved in, is less accepting.

Rudy Salas, who calls himself "an old barrio *viejo*—the oldest *pachuco* alive," disdains the labels *Latino* and *Hispanic* as watered-down terms, reflective of weakened ethnic unity. He prefers the

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strips the supply, a situation that has caused an inflation in house prices.

Unable to qualify for conventional loans, the Vietnam Chinese typically come in with large down payments raised among several extended family members, agents said. To finance new businesses, prospective merchants may enlist a dozen or more friends and relatives to pool their money to provide low-interest loans.

## Determination Displayed

Duong Qui Van, 29, opened an auto repair shop on North Broadway about a year ago with the help of two partners. Duong, who works 10-hour days, six days a week, and finds time to attend English classes and to participate in Vietnam Chinese associations in Chinatown and Lincoln Heights, displays a determination that seems understandable in light of his past struggles.

Duong spent nearly a year in a Malaysia refugee camp after his escape by boat from Vietnam before he joined relatives in the United States in 1978.

"I came from Vietnam with no money," he said, noting that his father lost his import business when the family left the country.

Duong received welfare for a year, while he went to school to acquire a trade, he said. During the next three years, while working at a body shop, he and a younger brother managed to save \$30,000.

Duong said he is as confident that he will succeed as he is that Lincoln Heights will become "another Chinatown."

Despite a history of being uprooted and discriminated against, the ethnic Chinese's businesses flourished in Vietnam, and they built their own hospitals, temples, schools and organizations, Duong said.

"And we can do it again here," he said.

Their reluctance to join established community groups, however, continues to irk their longer-established neighbors.

More than a dozen Asian-owned businesses have opened along North Broadway but few, if any, of the merchants have joined the local

term Chicano, popularized during the 1960s as a symbol of a more politically strident community.

"All the people I was with here 30 years ago fled, chasing the white man to the suburbs. I was stubborn about staying in the barrio," said Salas, who has worked as a city parks maintenance man for 30 years. He raised his children in the neighborhood and has gained a certain notoriety in the community as the father of two members of the Chicano rock group Tierra.

A mixture of Spanish and English words, edged with anger, tripped over one another in a rush to express Salas' disappointment over loss of "the closeness we had as young men in the barrio."

Salas admitted to a certain resentment toward the Asian newcomers—not a personal resentment, he said—but one born of the

frustration at seeing "Mexicanos, Chicanos, Mexican-Americans losing out badly again."

Salas noted that although the Asian refugees receive government assistance to ease their difficult transition into a new society, Mexican immigrants—some of them in the country illegally—receive no such help.

As the Asian refugees progress, Salas said, "Mexicans are in the same position they've been in for the past 50 years."

Having committed himself long ago to remain close to his Mexican roots by staying in the barrio, Salas finds himself in the ironic position of seeing the barrio moving away from him.

"I could never think of leaving Lincoln Heights," he said. "I was going to die here. Now it doesn't matter anymore."